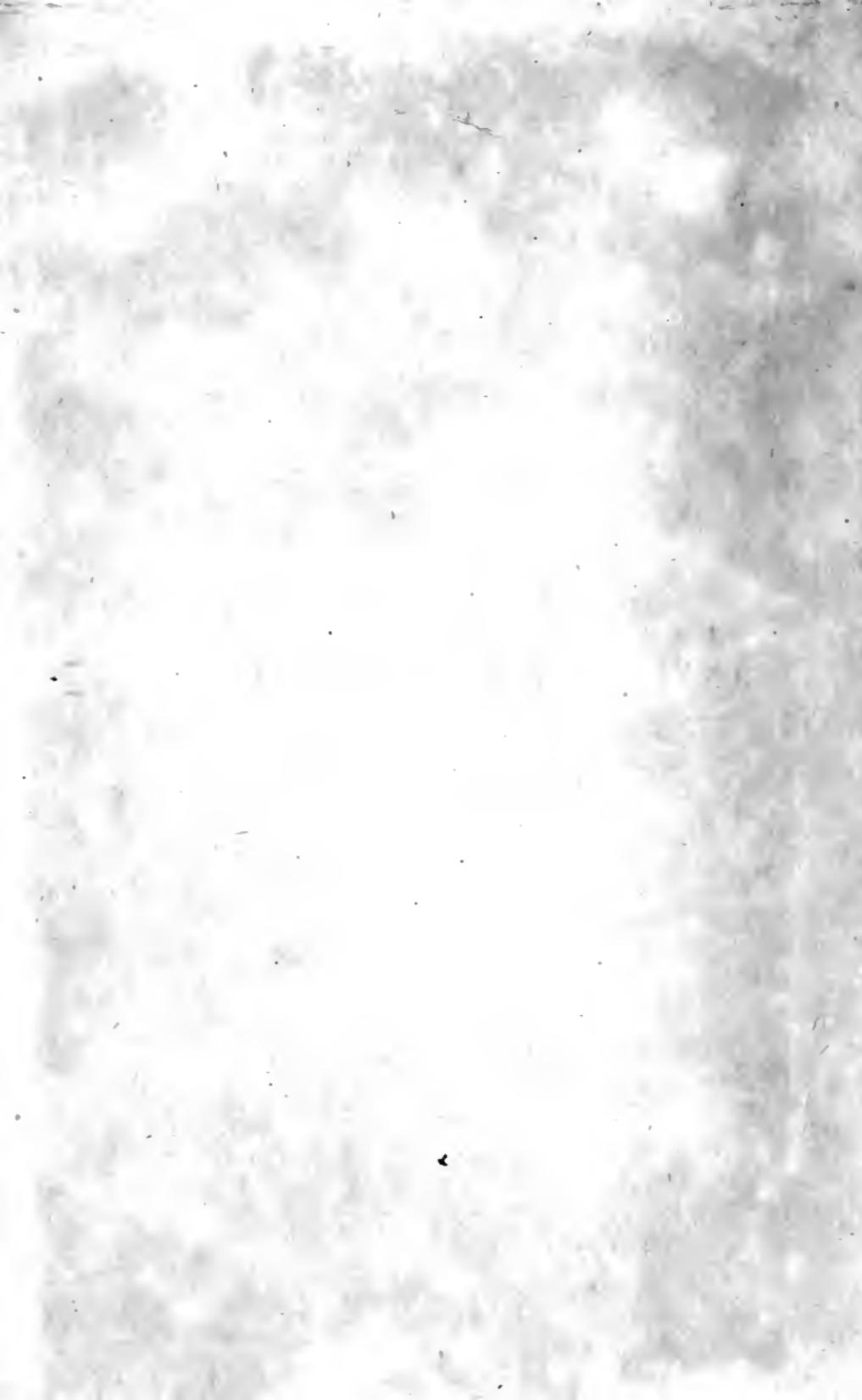


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ANNE JUDGE, SPINSTER.

VOL. III.

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ANNE JUDGE, SPINSTER.

BY

FREDERICK W. ROBINSON,

AUTHOR OF "GRANDMOTHER'S MONEY," "A WOMAN'S RANSOM," ETC., ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

L O N D O N :

SAMPSON LOW, SON, AND MARSTON,
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ANNE JUDGE, SPINSTER.

BOOK III.—*continued.*

TRANSFORMATION.

CHAPTER II.

REVENGE OR FIDELITY?

HUGH AYNARD, as we have intimated in our last chapter, went away rejoicing to Wolchester. The tact of his friend had set the present in its best light to him ; and, after all, why should he not regard the present like other men ? He had won the trial, there were no more spies to beset him at every turn, and he was going to be married to a beautiful and accomplished woman. If his happiness in life had begun a little late, still it was before him now, and he was, after all, a lucky man. He had never felt in better spirits than when he was seated in the railway carriage where

he had sought society and found it—which was a strange quest on the part of the master of Thirby Cross.

In old days, and when a railway journey was a necessity—or when it seemed to him a necessity, whereby he might baffle those who, to his jealous fancy, appeared eternally on the watch for him—he would select a carriage to himself, and bribe the guard to lock humanity away from him ; now, he sought society, as more congenial to his frame of mind. There were two children in the carriage—the young children of a young couple proceeding into the country—and he, who had always shrunk from children with a true bachelor's instinct, did not recede as he became aware of his surroundings, but composed himself in his seat and smiled at the boy, who was five years of age or thereabouts, and thought how blessed would be his destiny one day to have a son like him—some one to watch over and protect from all those nervous feelings which neglect, sheer neglect, had fostered in him ; and a girl like that golden-haired child of five or six years old—golden-haired as Clara was—and one who would be the mother's favourite. What happiness for him ! Happiness that was undeserved ; for he had been sullen, capricious, and eccentric, distressing those who served him, and those who would have become his friends. And, after all, to be blessed like other men—to be loved like other men—and all the stormy elements of life to vanish for ever away.

They who had known Hugh Aynard in his worst estate would have marvelled at him in his best—at the miracle which had been worked in him by the development of his natural affections.

Hugh Aynard was at his best that morning ; the excitement which he had exhibited in Harley Street had subsided, and he was no longer shut up in himself, but interested in all things passing around him.

He offered his *Times* to the gentleman facing him, and finding that the gentleman was more inclined for conversation than politics and advertisements, and that he was travelling to Wolchester with his wife and children, and knew Wolchester, Ilpham, and Thirby Cross as well as he did, he entered into a discussion on county matters with his companion until the children thrust themselves more completely into notice.

Before Wolchester was reached, Hugh Aynard had the boy upon his knee, and was showing him his watch, and interesting him in a little bundle of charms which hung from his watch-chain, as though he had been fond of children all his life.

“ A fine boy, madam,” he said to the mother, and so won the mother’s esteem for him at once. “ If I ever have a son like that, I shall be very proud of him.”

He kissed the boy before he stepped from the railway station to his carriage, which was waiting for him at Wolchester, and where he had expected to find Lady Burlinson or Mrs. Delancy, perhaps Ned, who was

strong enough to take a drive out by this time. But the carriage was empty, and he asked the coachman where the visitors at Thirby Cross were that morning.

“They are at home, sir, I believe.”

“How is Mr. Delancy?”

“Getting well very fast, sir. He walked a little way along the terrace this morning with Lady Burlinson.”

Hugh Aynard felt a slight twinge at his heart, but he resisted it at once; for Lady Burlinson was to be his wife, and Delancy was his friend. A twinge, not all of jealousy—nothing to do with jealousy, he thought, the instant afterwards—but of regret that, with Ned Delancy better in health, they had not all driven across to Wolchester to meet him.

“You should have brought my mare for me, not this lumbering thing, stupid,” he said, as he entered his carriage. “Drive on as fast as you can to Thirby Cross. Any news since yesterday?”

“No, sir.”

“Drive on, then.”

Yesterday he had received all the news in a dainty perfumed letter—how Anne Judge had been fetched away from Thirby Cross by her father; how Mrs. Holmes had confessed that she was Anne’s mother, and was now ill in her room, and had refused to see any one at present; how rapidly Edmund Delancy was recovering his strength, and how she, the writer, was

looking forward very anxiously to the return of him to whom she wrote.

Aynard thought of that peroration with which the letter had concluded, and dismissed all gloomy ideas upon the want of attention that had been shown him at Wolchester. His telegram had not reached Thirby Cross before the ladies had gone driving out themselves, and Ned was fatigued with his first walk on the terrace, and hence the reason for his solitary ride. He hummed over some portions of his symphony as he lounged back in his carriage, and he caught himself more than once drifting into Ned Delancy's waltz, as though it was a tune that clung to his memory as it had to Clara Burlinson's.

At the village of Thirby Cross, one or two who were loitering about there caught a glimpse of the master, touched their hats, and were rewarded by a friendly nod ; and as the carriage swung round by the old churchyard, Aynard observed that two men were filling in a grave there, and that a dwarfish-looking old man sat on the low stone wall superintending the operation.

He signalled to the coachman to stop. Village matters interested him ; for he knew the village-folk about him better than he did the country gentry.

“ Whose grave is that ?” he called from the window.

“ Mr. Judge's, sir,” was the answer of the sexton.

“ Indeed ! Clara did not tell me this, thinking that

it was not of sufficient interest to me, I suppose," he said, thoughtfully. "And yet this may bring Miss Judge back to Clara's side as a companion again. She was very fond of Anne Judge ; perhaps it is all for the best."

All for the best so far as Clara Burlinson was concerned, he meant ; for he connected all things with her, and even the death of old Judge might tend to Clara's happiness, if she had missed her late companion very much. A new thought suggested itself to him—it would look kind of him to call upon Miss Judge if she were in the village still. She had been a guest at Thirby Cross, and her modest demeanour, her gentleness and grace, would have arrested his attention ; had not his interest been already aroused by that story of her devotion to her father, which he had learned from Clara and Delancy. They were friends, and she might think it kind of him to offer his sympathy with her bereavement. Clara would think it kind of him, at all events.

"Where is Miss Judge staying now ?" he asked.

"I wouldn't go to her, if I was you," said the old man who was perched upon the wall, suddenly turning his head towards the carriage. "She's in too much trouble to-day ; too cut up altogether. I've kep' back myself a'cause of that, and a'cause she'll be better when all the cryin's out of her. One don't get used to a loss like her'n"—pointing to the grave—"all on a sudden,

or care for company to say how sorry they air about it. You knew the old genelman, mayhap, sir?"

"I did not know Mr. Judge."

"Ah, you missed a treat, then," said Mr. Smith, swinging his legs to and fro; "he was a perfect karakter—mild and ductile, and easy as a glove, sir. I am seeing the last of him—the werry last—out of gratitood and friendship. It was a comfor'ble funeral, you'll be glad to hear, and everything went off what I call well. I on'y hope that I may have 'arf as good a one myself, which, with my prospects, isn't likely; and knowing that, I don't fret much, for I'm sure the parish'll put me somewhere, as bound by law to do. So I'd call to-morrow, sir, on the poor girl, and not interfere just now."

"Yes, it will be better, perhaps," said Aynard, after a wondering stare at this loquacious old man, and then the carriage drove off again, and a dog of many colours, who had been lurking in ambush somewhere, flew after the wheels, and barked himself hoarse before his master whistled him back to more seemly behaviour.

At the large gates of his estate, Hugh Aynard was surprised to find his housekeeper standing, in deep black, as if waiting for his carriage to approach her.

"I thought that you were confined to your room, Mrs. Holmes," said Aynard, as the carriage stopped again.

"No, Mr. Aynard."

"You have been ill?"

“No, sir; I have been only anxious to escape a hundred questions—a hundred thousand, perhaps—from people who had no right to question me. Would you mind walking to the house with me, Mr. Aynard? I have a little to explain, at least, to one who has been always kind to me.”

“Will not to-morrow do?”

“No, sir.”

Hugh Aynard left his carriage, gave Mr. Griffin, who was bobbing at his lodge-door, a good-day, and then walked up the long drive with Mrs. Holmes.

“You will understand that I do not care for any explanation,” he said, anxious to avoid a painful history on his housekeeper’s part, “and that I have no right to receive one from yourself. Your past belongs not to me; you have been a good servant here, and with your faithful service I have been content.”

“You have been told, perhaps, that my name is Judge, and that I have been a sinful woman in my time, deserting a husband’s home, and a child who was very dear to me. Such a woman you cannot desire in your household any longer, sir.”

“What—what does Lady Burlinson say?”

“I have not asked Lady Burlinson for her opinion on the subject,” said the housekeeper, petulantly, “for it would not affect my resolutions. She will be very glad to see me leave the place, I have no doubt, for she has hated me from the first.”

“ That is a hard assertion, Mrs. Holmes.”

“ Call me Judge, please, that is my proper name from this day—the name of a woman who has been penitent some years, and who, at the last, was forgiven by her husband. I was at his funeral to-day—it was his daughter’s wish and mine—and even the hard sister did not shrink away from me.”

“ Why should a woman who is truly penitent leave my service ?” said Aynard. “ If you think that Lady Burlinson dislikes you, there is a town house of mine which will require more careful supervision presently.”

“ I leave here, sir. I shall go away, and be heard of no more. But, before I go, there is a duty to perform to you. She will think this my revenge for all past slights that have been given me, but she will be mistaken.”

“ What do you mean ?” said Aynard, with a nervous glance towards her.

“ I am not going back to the house any more,” she said, coming to a full stop before the house was in view. “ I have left your service, and have been only waiting at Thirby Cross to see you—for I could not, oh ! I could not leave you in their hands without a warning. What are they both—brother and sister—to me, that I should see their scheming and be silent ?”

“ I can hear nothing against Lady Burlinson,” said Aynard. “ You know that she will be my wife in a few weeks.”

“ I have nothing much to say against her,” answered

the housekeeper. "She is guilty only of a fault that was mine when I was young."

"You will please explain what you mean by that," said Aynard, becoming slightly excited at this assertion, and in his nervous curiosity forgetting his previous interdict on her revelation.

"I am here to explain, Mr. Aynard, and to lose your respect for an old servant at the same time. It is my fate to turn every one against me, and I accept it as a retribution. But I speak the truth, and I have no sinister ends to answer."

"What fault is this of Lady Burlinson's, that can resemble yours?"

"She is thinking of marrying a man for the sake of his position and wealth—a man unfitted for her in every respect, and whom she does not love."

"Mrs. Judge, that is an insult to me, and I will hear no more," he cried. "How dare you, my housekeeper, speak to me like this?"

"Not your housekeeper, Mr. Aynard. I have left your service, and am speaking to you as a friend."

"A friend of mine, indeed, to meet me thus, and seek to poison my mind against the best of women!"

"To warn you against the worst of men, who has led his sister on to this engagement."

"You speak of a gentleman who, interested in your false story of an early widowhood, sought my aid to place you here. Is this gratitude to him, too?"

“I speak of the man who broke my husband’s heart, and tempted me away from him—George Day.”

“He—he tempted you from your husband!” cried Aynard.

“Ah, you wonder what he saw in me,” she said bitterly, and here the natural weakness of the woman peered forth strangely. “And yet I was young and handsome enough once, and my vanity led me wrong, and I thought he loved me very much. I suppose he thought so too!”

“George Day—Doctor Day—the tempter. I—I don’t think that I understand this. Why keep this a secret so long?”

“I thought better of him once. But he gets worse, and becomes more dangerous, and so I warn you of him, Mr. Aynard. As for his sister—shall I go on?”

“Go on; say what you will,” said Aynard, removing his hat, and passing his hand over his forehead in a bewildered manner. “I will hear the worst that you have to say against her too, though there is not a word in which I shall believe.”

“She is a weak woman, who thinks that in time she shall learn to love you; and who thinks, just as I did, that love will come after marriage, perhaps.”

“I will not have her coupled with you like this, as if your positions and temptations were the same.”

“Sir, they may be presently,” cried the housekeeper. “I am a living testimony to the evil that follows an

ill-assorted union, and therefore I have the courage to warn you before I go away. I cannot see you duped like this, knowing how weak you are, and what misery may be in store for you, with your suspicious nature. I do not think that Lady Burlinson is fair to you, when she feels and knows that she loves another man. If I had loved George Day before my marriage with Mr. Judge, I should have been less guilty, for I should not have become another man's wife."

"She loves another man. What man can she love now?"

"Mr. Delancy."

"Ah, I see the mistake under which you have been labouring," he cried, joyfully. "It can be all dissipated with a breath. You are in error, Mrs. Judge. Thank Heaven you have been deceived, and that I can prove how false and base your insinuations are. There was an engagement between Mr. Delancy and Mr. Day's sister four or five years ago, and she, of course, loved him then. You have caught up the stray ends of gossip in the servants' hall, and, in your over-zeal, have repeated them to me."

"I wish that it could be explained in that manner; for I have an interest in leaving you happy, and I am not an ungrateful woman; but she loves him now, sir."

"No, no, no; she would not deceive me like this!"

"I have heard her say so more than once. Ask her yourself if she has not confessed to my daughter

in her room that she loved Delancy better than yourself?—if she has not lately told her brother so on the terrace outside the drawing-room, when Mr. Delancy was lying ill up-stairs?—if she has not been jealous of my daughter Anne on more than one occasion?—if she does not shrink in her heart from the prospect of her marriage with you? Pray ask her, Mr. Aynard, and if she deny all that I have told you, why, believe in her, and not in the woman faithful to your house; think it my revenge, and not my fidelity."

Aynard passed his hand across his forehead again. Was this a dream from which he should presently awake, or was he advancing to a reality that would blight every hope that he had fostered lately? Could he believe this woman, who had spoken with so much earnestness and agitation, and distrust her who had promised to be his wife?

"I will ask her myself; I will tell her what I have heard," he murmured. "You can leave me now, having done all the injury in your power to me."

"You will not regard it as an injury some day, sir," replied the housekeeper; "but as a friendly action which has saved you many after-years of misery."

"Where are you going?"

"To the village; where I may remain a day or two. If you doubt me still, confront me with Lady Burlinson. I shall not shrink in her presence from repeating all that I have told you."

“No ; that will be to show her at the outset that I have already half believed you—you, a woman whose whole life has been false.”

“Ay, that is true, though it is not your place to reproach me, Mr. Aynard.”

“You reprove me justly ; it is not my place,” he answered. “I will think this over-zeal on your part—nothing else but over-zeal—which has coloured a few hastily-uttered words, and made a story from them.”

“I have heard her say——”

“I will hear no more,” interrupted Aynard. “I have been a coward to listen to you. I tell you again and again that I do not believe a word that you have said.”

He walked away at a great pace, leaving Mrs. Judge looking after him. When he had gone about a hundred yards, he paused, as if with the intention of returning to her, and then went on again, walking rapidly, but somewhat unsteadily, towards his home, where he had believed so much of happiness awaited him.

Under the porch of his house he muttered :

“Heaven have mercy upon me if there should be any truth in what I have heard to-day !”

CHAPTER III.

LADY BURLINSON TRIES TO EXPLAIN.

THE first inquiry of the master of Thirby Cross was concerning Lady Burlinson.

“She is in her room, sir.”

“Tell her, if you please, that I am in the drawing-room, and anxious to see her at once.”

He would not remain a minute longer than necessary in this distress of mind; he would solve the mystery—if so poor a delusion could be called a mystery—on the very instant of his coming thither. He walked still unsteadily towards the drawing-room, entering, and half inclined to withdraw again when he found that it was already occupied by Edmund Delancy, who was reading near the open window. But before he could withdraw, Delancy had perceived him.

“My dear Hugh, I am glad to see you back at Thirby Cross, with that infernal trial off your mind. When did you arrive?”

"I have just come," he said; then he walked across to Delancy and shook our hero by the hand.

"Well, you are not sorry to find that I shall soon be as well as ever?"

"I am glad of that," answered Aynard.

"Is anything fresh the matter? If so, I shall begin to believe that this is an unlucky house indeed."

"I don't know—I hope not," Aynard said, confusedly. "But I have been met by a few strange incidents to-day, and I do not feel quite so full of hope and joy as I did two or three hours ago."

"Sit down, and tell me all the news, Hugh—that is, if you can trust me," he added, as he observed the hesitative manner of his friend.

"Delancy, I trust you," he said, suddenly stretching forth his hand again. "I do not believe that you have uttered one false word to me concerning Clara and your feelings regarding her from the first moment that we met in Ilpham."

"I hope you do not believe that. Why, Aynard, this is late in the day to begin the old suspicions."

"Yes, very late. But I am a fool, whose suspicions are easily aroused, and lately you have seen more of her—been thrown into her society against your will, if it please you; but still brought constantly face to face with her whilst I was away in London."

"You might have trusted me more. I thought you did," said Delancy, gravely.

"Yes, yes, I trust you. I have said so," he answered. "And now where is Lady Burlinson?"

"She is dressing for dinner, I believe—she and my mother. They have come back from a long drive, and your telegram has only lately been opened. I hope that they are not going to begin any fresh complications, Aynard. For Heaven's sake let us grope no more in the shadows."

"Delancy," said Aynard, dropping into a chair facing him, and looking very earnestly, even pathetically at him, "tell me again that you do not love Clara."

"Upon my word I don't," said Delancy in reply. "Upon my word I never shall. Will that do?"

"You do not treat this matter seriously, but you are speaking the truth, I hope. Now tell me if you think that Clara—— No, I can't ask you that," he cried with an impatient stamp of his foot. "I cannot lower myself and her so utterly in your eyes. I wish that she would come."

"Has Doctor Day been giving you any advice—speaking about me, for instance?" asked Delancy.

"No. Don't mention his name. I have heard something of him, too, that has astounded me very much."

"And shaken your confidence in him too?"

"Yes."

"Well, I am not very much surprised at that. He

shook my confidence not long ago—with an iron bar,” he said *sotto voce*—adding in an audible tone, “ It is more than likely that our friend Day is not a model character. But why let this man trouble your mind now, Aynard?”

“ You spoke of him first, not I.”

“ So I did. For I am a little suspicious of the good intentions of that clever fellow, who I fancy does not like me quite so much as you think. Only my fancy, perhaps, or only his fun.”

Aynard paid no heed to the remark ; he had clasped his hands together, and was leaning forward, looking down at the carpet, a knight of a woeful countenance indeed.

“ I have scarcely thanked you yet, Hugh, for saving my life that night you rowed after me to Aynard’s Roost.”

“ If I have only saved it to my own discomfiture,” he answered, moodily, “ bringing you back to life and her.”

“ Not to her, thank you,” said Delancy, drily. “ She belongs to the one friend to whom I stick from this day, despite all the doubts he has of me.”

“ I have no doubts of you, Ned.”

“ Not of her, surely, then ?” asked Delancy. “ Come, come, this is one of the old moods which I had hoped were submerged for ever, Hugh.”

“ They rise again—there is no keeping them down when an evil tongue whispers in my ear,” he said, rising.

“Tell Clara that I am on the terrace waiting for her, that I am very, very anxious to see her.”

“Why not send a messenger to her room, then?”

“I have done so, but she keeps away. Why does she keep away like this, as if she were afraid to meet me?”

He passed through the open window to the terrace, where he walked up and down bareheaded, waiting for the woman to whom he was engaged, and where Delancy watched him, and wondered what was on its way to balk the happiness of Hugh Aynard at the eleventh hour.

He was watching and wondering when Lady Burlinson came into the room and looked round timidly.

“Where is Hugh?”

“On the terrace waiting for you, Lady Burlinson,” said Delancy.

“Is—is anything the matter?”

“He appears excited, but a few words from you will calm him, I have no doubt,” said Delancy.

“I will go to him at once.”

And then Clara Burlinson passed on to the terrace and went to meet Hugh Aynard, who was at the further extremity, and still walking away from her with his hands behind him. When he turned at last to retrace his steps, he became conscious of her presence, and advanced rapidly towards her.

“No, my dear Clara, I do not doubt you,” he said, folding her to his breast and kissing her very passionately. “I have been a fool and a madman for the

last half hour, and now the folly and the madness are at an end."

"What has been troubling you, Hugh?"

"I have seen Mrs. Judge, or Mrs. Holmes, as we used to call her, and she has told me a story which filled me for a time with those cruel doubts that your presence has dispelled. For looking at you, Clara, I cannot read in your face anything like treachery to me."

"No, I hope that that is impossible to read."

"A wicked woman this Mrs. Judge," he said with a shudder, as she took his arm and they walked slowly along the terrace together, "who sought to poison my mind against you, as if the word of a servant were to demolish all confidence in my future wife. A woman who has spent her time in listening at doors since you have been the mistress here."

"In listening?" said Lady Burlinson.

"Yes, she avowed that. She professed to have heard you say to Miss Judge that you still loved Edmund Delaney, and that yours was to be a marriage for position, nothing more."

Clara Burlinson evaded his glance towards her, and his face darkened suddenly, although he went on very eagerly and quickly:

"As if you could have said that, being engaged to be my wife, and professing to return the deep, strong love I have for you; as if you would have so deceived me, Clara."

She did not answer yet, and he went on again :

“ She wishes to be confronted with you, and repeat her accusations to your face, this bold, false woman, whom I have nourished like a viper in this house—to accuse you of confessing to your brother when he was last here, and on this very spot, that your love for Delaney had not died away—rather revived when he was close on death, and your heart was sorrowing for him.”

“ What—what did you say to her ? ”

“ I told her that I could not believe a word that she had said to me—that I could not believe in your playing this false part towards me, and building up your misery as well as mine. Tell me that I spoke rightly to her.”

“ Yes, you spoke well, but——”

“ But what ? ” he asked in a hoarse voice, as she paused to struggle with her utterance.

“ But I did not deserve it, Hugh ; for oh, there is some truth in what you have heard to-day.”

“ Some truth ! ” he cried, “ you—you did confess to Miss Judge, after your engagement to me, that you loved Delaney ? ”

“ Yes, for I did love him then, or thought that I did. I have been always a jealous, irritable woman, and his presence disturbed my thoughts. I did not wish to see him again, I told you so one night here—if you remember—for he brings back the time when I was less

worldly and he was very dear to me, and I cannot face it with composure. Still——”

“Stay one moment, let me think of this,” he said, and his hand went up to his lips, after his old habit. “I do not see clearly before me what is coming—what you would have me believe.”

Her hand dropped from his arm, and he did not seek to replace it at his side, and they walked on together silently for awhile. Once she made an effort to speak again, and once again he interrupted her.

“I am thinking of this, Clara ; your patience with me for a little while.”

He spoke at last concerning the subject which was troubling him :

“She said that your brother, Doctor Day, had led you on to accept me for a husband. Was it really by his persuasion, then, that you said ‘yes’ to my offer?”

“He wished it very much, and I had no will—not much will—of my own. I thought that I should be happy with you, Hugh, in time. I think so more than ever, for now I understand you.”

“But you did not love me when you accepted me?”

“No, forgive me, I did not,” was the slow, frank answer.

“You loved Edmund Delancy?”

“I thought I did, perhaps ; I was a romantic fool, and did not know my own heart. Hugh, you must forgive me this, and believe that you and I may be

very happy together, with no secret to stand between us like a wall that keeps back confidence and love."

"Do not speak of love, please," he said, quickly ; "that is a word that jars upon me, and is romantic folly, if you will. Lady Burlinson, do I understand you now or not?"

"I have told you all that I have longed to tell you since our engagement was formed, Hugh," she said ; "which I should have found the courage to confess before we were married to one another."

"You esteem me ; in time, you think that it will be possible to love me?"

"Yes," she answered, eagerly ; "for I have forgotten him—lived him down completely."

"Madam," said Hugh Aynard, very gravely, and with more pride in his look and step than she had ever witnessed before in him, "I did not seek your esteem when I asked you to become my wife. I asked for your love, and, in my shallow vanity, I believed that I had obtained it. A woman without love for me I might marry for my own sake—for the sake of the passion that I had for her—but not for hers, if I were an English gentleman, and loved her purely and truly. I could not drag her down to misery, and I could not risk her soul and mine, by taking her to my heart with hers full of love for another man. Clara, you have deceived me, and it is best for you and me to sever this contract between us."

“ If you think so,” she answered, with a trembling lip.

“ I do not believe in love coming after marriage,” he said, gloomily. “ I could not value such a love as that at any time, and I should kill you with distrust before the truth was palpable. Better the old life of isolation, believing in no good around me, and jealous of every one about me, than life with a woman who has accepted me for my money, and bids me wait patiently for her affection. Our engagement was a mistake, which we should both be thankful that we can rectify so easily. It is ended for ever, madam.”

“ Be it so,” answered Lady Burlinson, very proud herself now. “ I have done you an injury, and I will repair it by leaving your house at once. I acted rashly in accepting you too hastily, Mr. Aynard, and I am sorry, very sorry, to have done so. But I was urged on—I was scarcely my own mistress—and I have suffered for that haste with you.”

“ Oh, you do not understand what my suffering is like ; for you have been the one thought to keep me strong, and it is dashed away by your own confession now. Still, thank you for dealing frankly with me at last. I wish you every happiness with a man whom you can more than esteem some day, but who will never, never think of you as I have done.”

“ And you study my happiness rather than your own in giving me up, Mr. Aynard ?”

If he had said yes, she was prepared to fling herself

upon his neck and beg him to trust her once again—to believe that it was love, not the fear for her own position which made parting with him very painful. She was prepared to make amends for all mistakes by a life that should be deserving of his confidence in her; but he was becoming very stern and hard, and there was no tenderness in the gaze he bent upon her.

“I study the happiness of both of us,” he answered.

“Very well,” she said, “I have no more to add. I will go away at once from Thirby Cross.”

He bowed his head in assent to this, and then he left her and went away into the park, where no one sought him out, and where he lay face foremost on the grass—until the darkness of the night stole on him.

The servants came in search of him at last, led by Delancy, who was scarcely strong enough yet, but who could remain no longer in suspense; and he sat up and listened to their voices, and then stole further into the park and so eluded them.

When it was high water, he was at Aynard’s Roost once more, and once more the green light was shining over the waste of water there.

“To think that it has ended like this,” said Ned Delancy from his open window, as he watched the old signal of distress, and read the beginning of fresh trouble from it.

CHAPTER IV.

DOCTOR DAY PREPARES FOR ANOTHER WORLD.

LADY BURLINSON returned home, and was in her brother's house in Harley Street a few hours after her brother had left for Doncaster. In that house she remained till his return, brooding on all that had separated her from Hugh Aynard, and trying to believe with him that all had happened for the best. She was distressed at what her brother would say when he returned—that brother to whom she had been more faithful, and who had been less deserving of her faith, than the two men whom she had left at Thirby Cross.

Lady Burlinson had lost her parents early in life, and been dependent on this brother for moral support and guidance ; she had looked up to him from a child as one whom she could trust, and one who loved her very dearly. Perhaps one of the best traits of character in the inconsistent and designing man whom we have endeavoured to portray was in his affection for his sister—a real affection that Clara saw and appreciated,

and that, under other circumstances, and with more "luck" on his side, would have made a different man of George Day.

But this luck had been dead against him from the first. If he had made his fortune suddenly, as other men about him had done, he would have been the best of men, he considered. He had been more than ordinarily successful in his profession, but it was not by his profession that he had ever hoped to attain great eminence, and the common respectabilities of life were beneath his ambition. He was fond of the highest and best society, and he courted it and mixed in it, even endeavoured to vie with it, after the fashion of that poor vanity which has caused so many to collapse.

If he had married early in life a strong-minded and sensible woman he might have passed through life unscathed ; and he had had this idea, as if conscious of his own weakness, and had fully believed that he was in love with a Miss Judge of Wolchester, until a great temptation suddenly came in his way, and he succumbed to it. The temptation that fitted him exactly he could never break away from, though he was extremely sorry for all unfortunate results when the end was reached and there was no stepping back. He was George Seymour when he proposed to Miss Judge, a hard-working doctor of three and twenty years of age, with a snug little practice that he felt would increase when

he was married to Mary Judge, who had some money of her own too, that was not to be despised.

Then he was introduced to her brother and the brother's wife, a vain woman, many years younger than her husband, and of the result the reader is aware. We need not linger upon it, for it has been already sufficiently shadowed forth in our story. Day repented afterwards again, or believed that he repented, and the tempter and his victim separated, the tempter shortly afterwards stepping into a fortune bequeathed him and his sister by an uncle whose name they assumed with the property at the uncle's request. He studied hard for a year or two after this, and gained fame and credit to himself; then he went wrong in a quiet way of which few were cognizant, then he repented and studied hard again, then he bet on the turf large sums, and won and lost and won again, then he sobered down anew, met Edmund Delancy, and took to him with all his heart until the Delancys became unfortunate and went to the wall.

This the variable life of George Day, becoming more varied and taking deeper colours to itself as the tortuous paths of his scheming led him further from all that was right, but contriving still to keep the respectable side to society, though drifting nearer and nearer to ruin. He saw at last that there was only one thing to save him, and he made a fair confession to his sister, whose money he had borrowed and lost, and she

sorrowed for his ruin, and thought that if she married well all would come round in good time.

And now that sister waited for George Day's return, and all was very dark ahead of both of them. Both saw the future and feared it, but the woman had more courage than the man to meet results when they were together at last, and he had led her back into the drawing-room, and closed the doors upon their common sorrow.

Day was unnerved, and he sat down and trembled very much ; he had been close to ruin more than once in life, and had read no warning from it ; but he had never faced it so completely as in that hour.

“There is nothing to be done now, Clara, but give in,” he said, despondently. “All that we have striven for is shivered into fragments.”

“That you strove for more than I,” she said, “for you know I only strove to be honest, and—of help to you.”

“I had weaved it all so elaborately,” he said ; “seen so far to the end, and then the one false step which led me to the boat-house precipitated all the scheming, and by one way or another reduced us both to this.”

“Took you to the boat-house ? On that night, George ? Not on that night ?”

“Yes. Ask Delancy to tell you that story presently. I cannot relate it now. I went there for your sake, lest Aynard should be more mad than I fancied,

and ill-use you after your marriage, and proofs—very strong ones—might be wanting to secure him and save you. Delancy thought that it was to obtain, through you, the supreme control of his property, but I had not looked so far as that, and—and I should have been rich by that time, and coveted no man's goods. Why should Delancy have thought so badly of me?"

"It was you that struck Delancy, then? Oh, George, to think that you have fallen so low as this!"

"Think the worst of me, Clara; I have no excuse to offer," he groaned. "I am a ruined man, and I give up from this night."

"Not utterly ruined?"

"So utterly ruined that no help can come in any way or shape towards me. That housekeeper, you tell me, was the cause of Aynard breaking the engagement?"

"Yes."

"Even that woman turns against me, too. I felt that she was no longer to be trusted."

"Did you know her, then?"

"Yes, at one time. That is another story which will reach your ears some day. You must not know the very worst of me to-night."

"What do you mean?"

"I would prefer for awhile that you remain in ignorance—remain for ever, if you can, seeking no one to enlighten you as to the great black blots upon the

brother whom you have loved too generously. Well, Clara, I should be more happy in my mind if I had not ruined you as well as myself; but the worst has come. There can be nothing worse to follow now."

"We shall be together, George. We will find a quiet country place where we shall be strangers to everybody around us, and there begin afresh a better and more straightforward life."

"You will be without me."

"No, no, you will not leave me alone," she cried; "we must keep together. I am a child in the world. I do not despise you, George."

"As I ought to be despised, you should add," he said, bitterly. "Well, well, we will talk more to-morrow of this. Only understand that without me there is a chance of your stepping back to the position of which you are worthy, and of finding some one honest and good to make you happy, and that with me there can only be disgrace. Try and understand this, Clara."

"I cannot," she moaned forth.

"I believe that it is possible to marry Edmund Delaney. With him you would be happy, I am sure; and if I have saved him for you after all, what have I to regret? I will no longer be the barrier in your way, I swear."

"Where are you going? What do you think of doing?"

"Of escaping my creditors, that is all," he said, with

a ghastly smile. "Good-night, bless you ; you will be much happier without me."

"But I shall see you again ? You are not going away at once ?"

"You will see me again," he said, thoughtfully ; "I shall not leave the house. Good-night."

He stooped and kissed her ; then he went away to his study, and rang the bell for Roberts.

"Roberts," he said, when the valet had appeared, and had closed the door behind him, "you have been a good and faithful servant in your way, not shrinking from a few deceptions to assist the master, and knowing more of the master, possibly, than any one living, save myself. You will leave my service at once."

"Leave your service, sir ?" said the amazed valet.

"I am a ruined man, and there is not the slightest chance of saving myself from disgrace. Roberts, you will find a hundred pounds in that pocket-book ; take it and go."

All this was very incomprehensible to Roberts, who received the pocket-book with many thanks, wondering why ruin should have rendered his master so generous.

"And take me as your warning too, Roberts," he said, with great seriousness, "and be less inclined to scoundrelism from this day forth ; for after all it does not pay, and there are many things against it which turn up at the last moment and mar every prospect of success. Live honestly—if you can, Roberts."

"I think of opening a public-house with my savings, sir," said Roberts.

"Don't drink, then, and you may make a respectable fortune. Good-night."

Roberts withdrew, murmuring his regrets and thanks in a breath, and Doctor Day rose, locked the door after him, sat down in his chair again, and regarded the future before him with all the philosophy that he could muster.

"I have parted with the last money that I have in the world," he said to himself, "and it would not have benefited my creditors much, for their name is legion. Now, there is the end of all this to come. Successful, I should have enjoyed life—unsuccessful, what is life to me?"

He opened his desk and took out the phial which we have seen before in his hands, and regarded it long and steadily for awhile.

"There is no one to regret me but Clara," he said, "and Clara will soon get over it; for though impressionable and kind, she never was a deep-feeling woman—not like Mary Judge, whom I served so badly—no, not like her."

He set his poison on one side to reflect for a moment upon his first love, and then he became full of thought of all the people whom he had known, and finally full enough of remorse to cry bitterly and like a woman over all the esteem that his rash acts had forfeited.

"I will write a letter to Delancy, explaining one or two matters that will put me in a better light with him, and with those by whom he is surrounded," he muttered. "Let him think of me justly, at least. Not the stagey villain, or the rascal of a novel, but a man who never was wholly bad, who has struggled more than once to sink all that was bad in him."

He opened his desk and hunted amongst a heap of letters and various papers for writing materials, with which his desk was scantily furnished, bringing to the light a banker's cheque-book for which he had not had much use lately—a book at which he stared, held in his hand and put down again, and yet could not take his gaze from.

"Aynard opened an account with this house, for I introduced him myself," he muttered; "he is a rich man, and requires a London house as well as those muddling Wolchester people. I wonder what his balance is at this place?"

He cleared away the litter upon his study table to consider this new question, and nearly upset the poison-bottle as he did so to the floor.

"If I had broken it," he said, as he held the phial in the shaking hand which had saved it from falling, "and lost even this friend!"

He placed that particular friend back in the desk for security's sake for a time, and then took up the cheque-book again, and thought once more of the

probable balance lying in Hugh Aynard's name at the banker's, now that Felix Aynard had settled all costs with his cousin.

"They think the worst of me now. I have lost caste completely, and can never face them again. It is death or this."

He preferred "this" after all, for he spent the rest of the night in imitating Hugh Aynard's signature from various letters that he found within his desk; and in the morning there was a clever fac-simile affixed to a cheque for a large amount—not so large as he could have wished, or dared to chance, but large enough to take him away from England, and from all those whose lives he had disturbed—from Clara in particular, who was to be much better and happier without him! With this cheque in one pocket, and his bottle of poison in another—for he had quite resolved upon poison if detected in the desperate attempt to save himself from beggary, he thought—he went down to breakfast with his sister. He hoped that she would not revive the topic of the preceding night, that she would not distress him by allusion to her disappointments. Let her think the best of him that she could, and take always into consideration the many temptations of which she knew nothing, when she was disposed by hearsay to believe the very worst. He kissed her affectionately before he went away, trusted that every blessing would attend her after-life, said that he should be home to

dinner, and then went away in his carriage to his bankers, reaching there at a quarter to twelve, a busy time of day, when there were many customers before the counter, and some little difficulty in being served with the notes and gold which the clerks were counting and shovelling to and fro.

His first idea had been to have the cheque put to his account, and then to have drawn upon that account later in the day ; but he grew nervous at the last moment, fearful of Aynard entering the bank at any instant—even whilst he waited there, of a telegram flashing to Wolchester and back with an inquiry and an answer ; and he wormed his way to the front, and gave a friendly nod to the clerk, who said “Good morning” to one who had kept a good account there, who was respected at the bank, and had dined, even, with the principals.

“I have a heavy cheque here of my friend’s. I hope the balance will stand it,” he said, laughingly ; and the clerk, who never joked about money matters on any pretence whatever, took it up and glanced at it without a smile upon his face.

“Shall I put it to——”

“I will take it, if you please, in notes—short,” he added, and he looked very hard at the clerk to show that he was not afraid to look any man in the face. He was a physician, and a customer at the bank—a well-known man, and not likely to arouse suspicion ; and as

the money was passed across the counter to him, the phial which he had held in his breast-pocket was allowed to drop to the depths for once and all.

He walked with a proud step out of the bank, meeting a friend on the top step who would have talked there all day, and whose conversation was torture to him then, for he had looked over his shoulder towards the busy clerks and customers, and seen his man—his very man who had cashed the cheque for him—poring over some great books at the back, comparing the signature upon the cheque with another signature before him, as though a new doubt had arisen in his mind after Doctor Day's departure.

“I have a patient very ill—a serious case—you will excuse me this morning,” he stammered forth, and then he ran down the bank steps and into his carriage, telling the coachman to drive fast towards Temple Bar. When he was out of sight of the bank, he called to the coachman to stop, and when the carriage was stopped, he got out hurriedly and told the man to drive home, as he should not require him any more that day.

He turned down a narrow street in the Strand that led to the water's side, and wandered about the neighbourhood till he found a small hairdresser's shop, into which he plunged, and from which he emerged beardless and youthful. Thence to the Strand again, where he hailed a hansom cab, and gave orders to be

driven to the South Eastern Railway Company's Station, where he took a ticket for Paris, and waited nervously and anxiously for the next train to Dover.

It was not till he was in Paris itself that he considered himself justified in looking over the Pont Royal, and letting his bottle of death drop from his fingers into the dusky Seine below him.

CHAPTER V.

A NEW RESOLUTION.

IT was Saturday night at Thirby Cross, and Aunt Judge and her niece were sitting "between the lights" in that little cottage wherein John Judge had started on his new life without taking his daughter with him. Old folk were shaking their heads over the summer that had left them, and the winter that was coming on ; September was verging on October, the days were drawing in, the nights were lengthening, and there were brown and yellow leaves whirling about the roadway with every passing breeze.

They were two grave-faced women sitting in that room, for the loss was heavy yet, and there had been nothing to replace that loss, or render it to either less acute. Nothing had been resolved upon for the future ; each had had her thoughts of what was best and right, each was above that humble cottage in position now, thanks to the money returned by a company that had once been flourishing, and then ravenous ; but neither

woman had the heart to suggest for awhile anything but peace and rest after the great loss that had come to them.

Every evening the woman whom we have known as Mrs. Holmes, and lately as Mrs. Judge—guessing, however, her shabby secret from the first—came there, to sit with them for half an hour or an hour, like a guest who had a right to come, and was privileged to take her place between them. A woman who it was perceived was nervous and shy, not at ease in Mary Judge's company, and to whom Mary Judge was somewhat distant, despite her effort, for her niece's sake, to look as if the new-comer were a welcome guest there.

The father and husband, the man who had been most cruelly wronged of all the Judges, had murmured his forgiveness at the last; the wife was penitent, and loved her daughter very much, and there was no more to be said against her. It was Anne Judge's wish that the mother should come, and the aunt could not set an interdict upon her coming, would not have done so even had she seen more clearly what would be the end of all these visits.

Suddenly the resolution was formed in the mind of one deep thinker there, the younger and the prettier woman.

“Aunt, you will not think me very hard and cruel if I talk of leaving here,” she said, laying her hand upon Mary Judge's arm.

The aunt started at the touch, and said :

“With her?”

“Yes, with my mother and you—if you will come,” she added, doubtfully.

“That is impossible,” replied the aunt. “Your mother never liked me, and perhaps the affection was and is not very great between us. I bear her no ill-will, but I do not love her like a sister. There is no wholly forgetting the past.”

“You have forgiven it for my sake, aunt?”

“Yes, wholly forgiven it, if you will.”

“If my mother thought that, she would be so different to you, and she and you would understand each other better.”

“No, I think not,” answered Mary Judge.

“I feel that my duty lies with her—to comfort her and keep her strong. Don’t tell me, aunt, that you think that this is a wrong conviction on my part, and that you will hold aloof from any sympathy with it.”

Aunt Judge reflected for some moments before she committed herself to a reply.

“If I hold back, knowing that my independence—even my isolation—is better for you and her, I will not hold back my sympathy, Anne,” she said. “For I think, my dear, I understand you now that I feel less jealous of those who step between us. She is a penitent woman—she is your mother—and I have nothing to say against her. How dare I say a word to shake your faith in her!”

“She seems to me to take the father’s place—to be everything to me. She needs a friend, a daughter’s love so much—for oh, aunt, she has suffered so much, too !”

“Suffered deservedly,” added Aunt Judge. “Do not in your own heart make excuses for her past; and remember, Anne, that when she makes excuses herself for all that took her from your father’s home, she speaks against that father. There is no defence for her, and she should know it.”

“Do you distrust her penitence ?”

“No,” answered Mary Judge, “I do not distrust that.”

She distrusted Mrs. Judge, however, her strength of mind and character; and before her in the future she feared that trouble might arise. But she only feared this; there were no proofs, and there was no gauging to the depths of the new heart of Mrs. Judge.

They were sitting away from the window, and were unaware that a visitor was approaching, until a hand struck upon the door without.

“It is she,” said Anne, starting up; “try and be kinder—I mean more gentle to her to-night, for my sake, aunt.”

“I am kind enough; she knows that I was never demonstrative,” said Miss Judge, almost petulantly.

Anne opened the door and admitted—not the house-keeper of Thirby Cross, but Mr. Edmund Delancy from the great house.

"Oh, Mr. Delancy, are you strong enough to come all this distance?" cried Anne, in her alarm at his appearance there; "is not this rash of you?"

"I am as strong as ever, almost, Miss Judge," he answered.

It was to be "Miss Judge" and "Mr. Delancy" between them again, he thought—at least for the present, and until their relative positions were understood. There had come a great change to more than one resolution lately, and he was anxious to know whether all that had happened was to exercise its influence on his after-life.

He was looking somewhat pale still, and Anne thought that he sank a little wearily into the chair that was placed for him after bidding good-evening to Aunt Judge—who, by the way, had not quite made up her mind how to receive this intruder. She was not reconciled to visitors of any description yet awhile, though time, reckoned by yards of pillow lace, was not so valuable to her as it had been.

"Your mother is well, I hope?" asked Anne; "I have received a kind letter from her, and she promises me an early visit here. I shall see her, of course, before I go away for good."

"For good—where?" he asked.

"Ah, that is not decided upon."

"It is as well to do nothing in a hurry," he said, drily. "My eccentric friend Mr. Aynard went away

in a hurry to the old quarters two days ago, and the tide will only reach him again to-night."

"You are not going there?" asked Anne, eagerly; "oh, sir, you will never be so rash as that?"

"I have a friend to console and bring back with me. I can't let him return to all those horrible suspicious thoughts. You are aware that the engagement between Lady Burlinson and him is at an end?"

"Yes, my mother has told me."

"It is an engagement that should have ended before this if there was no affection between them," said Delancy: "I see nothing to grieve for, and a little to rejoice at. But then Mr. Aynard is not likely to see the case in my light at present."

"If he should refuse to come back with you to Thirby Cross?"

"I am going to take him back to Ilpham-on-the-Cliff, and my apartments there, for a day or two. I shall devote all my attention to the man who saved my life, and wished me for a friend."

"When do you go to Ilpham?"

"To-night, by 'the husbands' coach,' which will stop here in twenty minutes' time."

Anne drew her breath. By "the husbands' coach"—the coach that only two months back brought to her the man whom she loved best in all the world—whom she should ever love best, however far they might stand apart from one another, sundered by circumstances

which nothing could beat down between them. "The husbands' coach" that came to Ilpham-on-the-Cliff and brought her father with it—that father who looked so far ahead for happiness with her, and was now sleeping in his grave. What a long, long while it seemed ago!

Delancy saw the change of colour in Anne Judge's face, although the room was almost dark enough to hide it, and he said quickly:

"I have grieved you. Pray forgive me."

"There is nothing to forgive, Mr. Delancy," she replied. "I must grow accustomed to all sad associations connected with him. They will in time be pleasant to look back upon, keeping him in my memory more closely."

"Yes," said Delancy; "but I need not have blurted this out like a brute."

"You are going to Ilpham to-night, then?"

"To-morrow I play at St. Bride's Church. I have been too long an idle man; and Mr. Weston thinks that I have been shamming. So to-morrow, the old life."

"I will bid you good-bye now, lest I should be gone from here when you return, Mr. Delancy," she said.

"Gone!" he echoed.

"I think of leaving Thirby Cross with my mother very shortly—perhaps very suddenly. My mother, who takes the father's place, and to whom I devote myself," she said, significantly.

“Oh, that’s it?” was his answer.

There was a silence in the room after this. He had been surprised, and he took time to recover from the news which had been given him. He had expected something new and strange, for he was not destined to run on in the common track of every-day mortals whilst oscillating between Thirby Cross and Ilpham ; but still he was surprised. He waited until Aunt Judge had lighted her candle and set it on the table—one candle, of a bilious complexion and a spluttering wick, that appertained to the meagre, economic life to which Aunt Judge seemed to cling still, as though there was something in it which she loved after all ; and when the mistress of the house was back in her place, he spoke once more and startled both of them—Aunt Judge considerably.

“What kind of a husband do you think that I should make Anne Judge, ma’am ?” he inquired.

“Mercy on me !” ejaculated the aunt.

Anne looked at him reproachfully—seemed even hurt at the unceremonious manner in which he had hurled the question at them.

“I do not think that we need keep the secret any longer, Anne,” he said ; “there was only one whom it could harm to tell, and he had better have known it after all. You are not aware, perhaps, Miss Judge,” he said to the elder woman, “that I am in love with your niece ?”

“She—she has never said a word about it to me.”

“Was it a time to speak of love, aunt? Is it,” to Delancy, “worth speaking of again? Was it not a promise which——”

“It was a half-promise; but you have told me that you are going away again, and it is a serious matter for me.”

Anne clasped her hands together. Did he think that it was not a serious matter for her?

“The father’s wish I felt bound to respect; your wish to live for him and away from me, Anne, to respect also. But I am not so certain about the mother.”

“You will not say a word against her—imply a word against her, I hope, Mr. Delancy?” said Anne.

“Not for the world. Do not get angry in her defence,” he said, gravely, “for I am the last man likely to attack her.”

“I am hasty—not angry.”

“And considering all things, I do not know that there is any particular reason for calling me ‘Mr. Delancy’ this evening,” he said, with his old smile flickering about his lips, “for you are going away, and so am I.”

“Yes, we are going to separate in earnest at last, Ned,” she said, sadly; but the mention of his Christian name at his appeal, altered the whole expression of his face, and made him look as if he were rather glad to hear the news than otherwise.

“We have said ‘good-bye’ before this—have thought of more than one long journey separating us, Anne ; and you will forgive me, but I do not entirely believe in this one.”

“Ah, it is too late to doubt,” said Anne.

“I shall certainly find you out, wherever you get to, you may depend upon that,” said Delancy, confidently. “You remember that I have never promised to keep away from you.”

“I am still further removed from you—devoted to a woman on whom the world turns its back ; pledged by my word to her life, as I was pledged to my poor father’s.”

“Yes ; but that need not shut you away from me,” said Delancy, with the old firmness highly predominant. “My interest in you, Anne, never dies out again ; and you are the one woman over whose future I must watch, whatever becomes of you or me, or however calmly in the future we may regard each other. Unless——”

“Unless what ?” said Anne, slowly, raising her head, which had bowed itself more and more towards her lap.

“Unless you tell me that you never loved me—that it was all romance, and impulse, and morbid sympathy that made you say you did.”

“You know——” she began, and then paused, or else he interrupted her with his usual impetuosity :

“That you cannot say that. Very good. Then

you cannot blame me in your heart, Anne, for not doing my best, or my worst, to forget you."

" You are free, and——"

He interrupted her again :

" Oh, we are both free ; there is no engagement between us. I understand all that. That was very nicely arranged last time we met, Anne."

" You are free to marry Lady Burlinson now. I wish that you would ; for she has never forgotten you."

" I would prefer your not mentioning names at present, or indicating any one as an eligible match for me," said Delancy. " How would you like me to point out some one across the street, and say, ' Marry that fellow, for I think that he will suit you ? ' "

" I shall never marry," answered Anne. " You must remember that, Ned—or I am a great blot on your life. Oh, I cannot believe that you are likely to think of me for long—I would rather not believe it. Think of my mother, whose life has been more lonely and more terrible than my father's, and do not step between us to embitter her remaining years. Forget me now—part with me now for ever ! "

She put her hands in his, and looked with eyes that were brimming over into his face.

" What do you say, Aunt Judge ? " he said to the grave-faced woman, who had listened to all this with a sphinx-like countenance.

“I say, do not distress the girl,” said Mary. “She has had much to trouble her lately.”

“I will distress her no longer—not for all the world,” said Ned, bowing to the elder woman’s reproof. “I will not distress her, or seek to find her for twelve months from this day. I will only say good-bye now.”

“For ever, Ned, this time.”

“No, I will not say for ever for all the women in the world, who would dash my heart down lower than it is to-night; but I will say good-bye, and, once more, don’t forget me.”

“Is that likely?”

“I have a claim upon your best thoughts, as well as your mother has,” said Delancy; “and I do not waive my claim altogether. By George! here comes the coach, and I have not said half that I wanted to say. Shall I stay another half-hour, and drive over to Ilpham in the chaise again?—the chaise that took you and me to Wolchester and back.”

“Ah, that happy day! But don’t stay—pray leave me.”

“You will say, ‘Don’t forget me,’ too, Anne?”

“I cannot say that. I have just asked you to forget me—to part with me for ever.”

“But you don’t want to be wholly forgotten, surely, granting that this parting is for ever, even?”

“Well, not quite forgotten, then.”

She let him hold her to his heart and kiss her again, for that was their final parting she felt assured, and he was deeply moved, for all the lightness of manner which he attempted to show before he went away. They would not meet again; how could their paths cross each other in the great maze of life wherein she would be lost to him?

“I like these good-byes,” he said, “because they never come to anything, and lead me a step nearer to you every time, Anne.”

“Not at the last—a jest,” she answered.

“No, at the last a hope which I carry away with me, and which will keep me strong.”

He went away with his old firm tread, as though no gloomy forebodings should daunt him on his way, and Anne stood at the door and watched him cross the road towards the coach. She stood there till the coach passed and took him from her sight, waving her hand in return to him, although the whole scene was very misty, and she could scarcely see him through her tears. She stood there long after he had been borne away to Ilpham, and it was not till her aunt touched her arm that she became conscious where she was, and with whom.

“Anne, you are very young to have a lover like him—to have won that man’s heart to yourself. And very strong,” she added, “to give him up for the mother of whom you know so little.”

“The mother who loves me too, and has not a friend in the world.”

“No, not a friend but you,” said Mary Judge. “I do not seek in any way to balk the happiness, which, by an effort, will be hers. You were true to the father before her; it is right, perhaps, to be true to her now that the father is dead and has forgiven her. I will not speak of this any more, only to say that to think too much of him, and to live with the mother for ever will not be wise.”

“Why not?”

“You and Mr. Delancy are both young; you are old in thought for your years, and this is a love that you may never outgrow; but men are fickle in their thoughts of women, and forgetful.”

“To forget me, and marry Clara Burlinson, will be the best thing that he can do, and the best news for me.”

“The best news, because you will think that he is sorrowing for you without? Ah! my dear, I am older than you, and know what hypocrites the men are. They are not fond of fretting.”

Perhaps she was thinking of Doctor Day just then, or else felt that it was her duty to assure Anne that she need not treasure too fondly the image of the first lover. For such an image was of clay, she thought, and must be hurled to the ground at the first shock of the storm.

But it was doubtful if Aunt Judge's thoughts were not in an unsettled state, and she knew not what was best, for later in the evening she said suddenly :

“Perhaps it would not be fair for you to forget him entirely, even if it were possible.”

And Anne said, “No,” and did not reprove her aunt for once more introducing the subject of Ned Delancy to her.

Mary Judge was disturbed in thought till the last—till the very last, when the mother had been told of Anne's new resolution, and had cried and wrung her hands and was thankful that such a daughter was left to her remaining years—when the mother and daughter were ready to depart, and the daughter had bidden Mrs. Delancy good-bye at Thirby Cross, and there was only one more farewell to take before a long journey was commenced—and they went away to where the shadow of the past life should cross no one's path but their own.

“Be kind to her,” Mary said, in a low, almost stern whisper to the late housekeeper of Thirby Cross. “And remember that she gives up all for you.”

“I will remember,” answered Mrs. Judge, and then mother and daughter went upon their way.

CHAPTER VI.

AN OBSTINATE MAN.

“THE husbands’ coach” to Ilpham-on-the-Cliff bore but few husbands to the sea-shore on the Saturday night when Edmund Delancy said good-bye for the third time to Anne Judge. “The husbands’ coach” was doing a bad business at that time of the year, and it was only the fine weather which had induced the proprietor “to keep the thing going” so late in September. As it was, husbands were scarce and lodgings were plentiful in Ilpham, where the nights were cold and the wind was getting fresher every day.

“You see,” said the coachman to our hero, who had the box-seat on this occasion, “there’s a want of liveliness in the place, and people won’t come to it who like life. You have found it very dull yourself, I’ll be bound to say, sir.”

“It is the liveliest place that I was ever in,” replied Delancy.

“ You don’t mean it?” and the coachman cast a horrified glance at his passenger.

“ Oh yes, I do.”

“ What an existence yours must have been, sir, axing pardon for saying so,” said the coachman, pityingly.

“ Yes, it has been an existence,” assented Delancy.

“ This is a little joke at our quiet town, mayhap.”

“ No joke to me,” said our hero, gloomily, and then he thought of his last two months in Ilpham and its neighbourhood, and how there had been crowded within them many joys and sorrows, much of romance and mystery, everything that had taken him from the common road of life and changed for ever his ideas. Ilpham a quiet place! Well, he had not discovered that fact yet awhile. He had despaired of adventure when first accepting the post of organist at St. Bride’s Church, now he despaired of his adventures ever ending.

Later on the Saturday night he astonished Mr. Weston, on whom he had called after setting foot in Ilpham, by remarks similar to those with which he had perplexed the driver of “ the husbands’ coach.”

He received Mr. Weston’s congratulations on his better health, thanked him for the same, and then expressed his intention not to retain his post of organist after October next.

“ I am very sorry,” said Mr. Weston, who saw trouble before him—further advertising, and a long regiment of *ineligibles* marching one by one into his organ-loft. “ I

understood that you intended to settle down here, Mr. Delancy?"

"I intended to try to settle down, but the place is too noisy."

"Too noisy? dear me," said the amazed incumbent.

"There is a want of peace about it which excites me too much," Delancy explained. "I don't get a day to myself; people are always running after me, or I am running about after other people, and there is a general air of excitement over everything and everybody that is too much for me."

"Indeed!" and Mr. Weston looked at Delancy, and thought that it was doubtful if the organist had entirely recovered from the accident at Aynard's Roost.

"Still, I shall always look gratefully back at Ilpham-on-the-Cliff," said Delancy, in a thoughtful manner, and to the further bewilderment of Mr. Weston; "and the luckiest day of my life was that Saturday night which brought me to this place, and gave one old gentleman a fit."

"Bless my soul," gasped forth Mr. Weston, "you—you are quite sure that you can manage the organ to-morrow for us?"

"What—has it become unmanageable, then? You don't mean to say that the dear old fellow has missed me, and grown restive?"

Yes, he had better see about a substitute at once, thought Mr. Weston. That blow on the head of the

organist had been too much for the poor man. He would have preferred seeing Mr. Aynard again—though that gentleman had kept him in a state of nervous trepidation every service at which he had officiated—to Mr. Delancy, who was coming back to church before he was properly cured.

“I think that I can arrange for to-morrow without troubling you,” he insinuated.

“My dear sir, I have come on purpose to play.”

Then their conversation took a practical turn, and when Mr. Weston parted with his organist he was reassured.

“I shall be sorry when he goes,” said Mr. Weston to himself.

He might have been perplexed by fresh doubts had he heard Delancy giving orders for his landlady to find a boatman to row him once more to Aynard’s Roost when the tide served—that landlady, who was more rejoiced to see him than if he had brought her a quarter’s rent in advance for her apartments, at an increased rate, and at the slackest time of the year, when the whole town was to let.

“You are not going slap into the face of danger agin, Mr. Delancy?” cried Mrs. Simmonds. “Oh, dear me! I thought that you had had enough of that wicked place.”

“So I have, Mrs. Simmonds; and I am going to persuade a friend of mine to give it up for good too.

He will sup with me to-night, and sleep in the next room to mine."

"Mr. Aynard, sir?"

"Yes."

"You'll never get him away from that Roost if he's in one of those old tantrums which used to come upon him there, and keep him there."

"I'll try, at all events."

"And you'll excuse me, Mr. Delancy, but you don't seem strong enough yet to go racketing about the sea at this time of night."

"I'm as strong as a house—Aynard's boat-house," he added to himself.

He was doubtful of his own strength in his heart, for when he was seated in the boat, which was launched from the cottage near Aunt Judge's old habitation—Delancy having ascertained that course to be more legitimate than the route which Hugh Aynard had taken him one night after dining with Doctor Day—he said, addressing himself in the old patronizing tone which we have heard him assume more than once :

"It has been hard work to keep up, but we must fight through it, Edmund—if we can."

He reached the boat-house in safety and with rapidity, for the water was high, and the man who rowed him was anxious to get this fare off his mind. Delancy found the boat from Thirby Cross drawn up under the house—packed away, in fact, very carefully with its

oars, as though its owner intended a long stay there. There was no precaution as to Aynard's own safety or comfort, for the door of the boat-house was open, and swaying to and fro in the breeze, clanging noisily every minute against the framework, and shaking the whole edifice.

“This is the last time, I hope, that I shall ever visit here,” said Delancy, as he went up the staircase, after telling the boatman to wait for him, and to warn him, if it were necessary, when the tide was turning. All was very still within the room, the door of which was ajar, and the thought came to Delancy that if he should find this man dead—this man who had saved his life, and to whom he felt strangely and strongly attached—what a new loss and sorrow it would be to him.

He knocked lightly at the door, and receiving no answer, he passed into the dimly-lighted room.

Hugh Aynard was asleep—as he had seen him on that night after they had come round with the tide from the open sea, and were each suspicious of the other. It was the same worn, weary face at which he had gazed two months ago, and which had softened and improved of late, until the disappointment came to dash him down; now it was full of a deeper trouble than ever he had been a witness to.

“Aynard,” said Delancy in his ear, and the sleeper moved restlessly at the summons, opened his eyes at the

second appeal to him, and looked hard at his visitor. Aynard did not appear surprised to find some one at his elbow—rather like a man who had outlived all surprises, and was weary of humanity.

“ You know me, Aynard ?”

“ Yes. What do you want here ?”

“ I want you to come back with me, Hugh,” said Delancy ; “ this is not the place wherein I like to find you.”

“ I have come here to die, Delancy,” answered Aynard ; “ I am in the way of everybody—even of myself ; and it is better to wait patiently for the end, and let those who come after me be happier than I have been.”

“ There is plenty of time for your happiness, Hugh,” said Delancy.

“ Shall I find it here ?” was the answer quickly and fiercely put.

“ No, I don’t think you will.”

“ Then I can find it nowhere else—for I shall never leave this place.”

“ Hugh, I expected this,” said Delancy, “ guessing what you have been, and knowing what you are ; but that resolution I hope to shake.”

Aynard gave his old scornful laugh at this.

“ I do not see the necessity, Hugh, of all this morbid grief for a woman who has deceived you.”

“ Not a word against her, Delancy,” said Aynard ;

“she was led on by her brother, and was tempted by him to fool me into loving her.”

“For a woman in whom we have both been deceived, and yet who is a woman of many virtues,” continued Delancy; “thoroughly a woman, weak, capricious, and not quite certain whom she loves. Are you going to die for her?”

“Did you not think that you could die for her, once?”

“No; I thought that I should live her down in good time, and I succeeded. I was prouder than you, Aynard, and did not want the world to laugh at me.”

“It may laugh at me as long as it likes,” said Aynard, in reply; “you laughing with it, having won the game, and being free to love her again. Delancy, I hope that you will marry that woman; she must not be unhappy all her life for your sake.”

“Or for yours; for if you die here, she will never know a happy minute again.”

“I shall not trouble her thoughts much,” he said, with a second short laugh, after he had paused for a moment to reflect upon what Delancy had last said, “though she disturbs mine still, try how I will to keep her at a distance. Delancy, you will marry that woman.”

“Thank you; but I am going to marry some one else.”

Aynard was surprised, even interested; and this

was the first good sign for which Delancy had been watching.

“You are going to marry some one else?” he repeated, slowly. “When?”

“In about twenty or thirty years or thereabouts,” said Delancy, coolly. “The lady is in no hurry, and I can wait any time.”

“It is strange,” said Aynard, “I do not quite understand you; I never did,” he added, with a sigh.

“You distrust me again?”

“Yes; all the old thoughts have come back—deeper and blacker thoughts than I have ever had before—and I trust no man.”

“Hugh Aynard,” said Delancy, laying his hand on his companion’s shoulder, and speaking with an earnestness that had its effect on his weak listener, to whom he had always been a jester perhaps, “you must trust the man whose life you saved. Trust him to rescue you from the weakness and misery to which you give up like a coward, rather than resist like a brave man.”

“I am no coward,” muttered Aynard.

“I am not going to give you up, for I trust you. I am not going to resign a true friend, or to let him resign me. Shoulder to shoulder together, till we have marched out of the gloom, which spreads over my life as well as yours—till we can look back at the darkness, and say, ‘See from what we have escaped.’”

" You are a strong man ; I am a weak one," said Aynard.

" Therefore we suit each other ; therefore I take to you as to a brother, over whom I can watch, and who, in good time, and when I need it, will watch over me. Aynard, do you think that I have forgotten all your kindness—your interest in me when I lay ill—and that I can let you rust on here, knowing what a good fellow you are, and what a friend you can be ? You should think better of me than that."

Yes, Aynard was very weak ; for he covered his face with his hands, and cried like a child at this appeal.

" I—I did not think that I had a friend in the world," he said, " or that any one cared for me. I am glad to hear that you do, Ned, but I shall never leave this place."

" Then I must stay with you," said Delancy, firmly. " You would not leave me here when I was in danger, and you are in greater danger than ever I was, Hugh."

He opened the window, and called out to the boatman :

" How is the tide, there ?"

" It has turned ; I hope that you will not stay much longer, sir."

" You can go at once," said Delancy, " and come back to-morrow with provisions. Stay one minute. I will give you a note to Mrs. Simmonds, of Prospect Terrace."

He sat down to write, opening one of the great tomes on the table, and tearing a fly-leaf therefrom, on which he began writing hurriedly several directions—orders to see Mr. Weston, and state the writer's inability to attend to-morrow at St. Bride's; orders not to inform his mother where he was for the present; orders of a variety of kinds, which made his head swim, and compelled him to clutch suddenly at the table to save himself from falling.

When he looked up again, Hugh Aynard was bending over him.

"You are ill," cried Aynard. "You were not strong enough to come here. You must go back at once."

"I shall certainly stay," said Delaney, faintly.

"You have overtaxed your strength, I see it now. Return with the man in the boat to Ilpham, or this place will kill you."

"I shall be better in a minute. I shall not go back."

He was obstinate to the last; it was his natural failing, and he would not give in. He remembered nothing more for awhile, save that the boat-house swam round him, and Aynard called out his Christian name; then all was cloud-land, with an unpleasant ringing of bells and rushing of water in his ears; and when he came to himself he was in the boat on the Backwater, making for the low shore of Ilpham.

“Stop that!” he cried at once to the boatman. “Where’s Mr. Aynard? I am going back to him.”

“I am with you, Ned,” said Aynard, who was supporting Delancy’s head on his lap. “I could not leave you like this. I am going back with you.”

“For good, old fellow?”

“For good or for evil, back to the life to which you impel me.”

“Yes, it is all my fault. I am very glad that you are not an obstinate man,” Delancy said, very faintly still; “obstinacy is not a virtue.”

“Don’t speak any more at present. You have overtaxed your strength in coming in search of me. Keep quiet for a moment, Ned; try and sleep.”

“All right. Keep your knees out of my back as much as you can, then.”

Aynard let him close his eyes, and Delancy slept all the way to the shore, with his eccentric friend watching over him and screening him from the night wind by a great blue cloak which he had brought down with him from the Roost.

“Do you think that you can walk to Prospect Terrace, Ned?” asked Aynard, when they had landed.

“With the assistance of your arm, I have no doubt that I shall manage it,” said Delancy; and somewhat slowly, but steadily, the two men reached Mrs. Simmonds’ house at last.

“Oh, my gracious, has anything more gone wrong?”

cried Mrs. Simmonds, who opened the door for them.
“How pale the dear boy is looking!”

“The dear boy is all right, Mrs. Simmonds,” said Delancy. “And everything is going right, and going to keep right.”

“There’s a gentleman up-stairs called to see you, Mr. Delancy—on very important business he says, for he won’t go away.”

“The deuce he won’t,” cried Delancy. “Such is life at Ilpham, you see, Aynard; there is no keeping quiet here, there *is* no rest.”

“True,” replied Aynard, moodily.

“You and I, Aynard, will take a long holiday together, and get this Ilpham and all belonging to it off our minds. Now for the mysterious stranger.”

“Shall I come with you?” asked Aynard, in a hesitating manner.

“To be sure! As if I were going to lose sight of you again.”

The two friends went up-stairs together, and found the mysterious stranger to consist of an under-sized gentleman, with a big, bald forehead, that seemed to belong to somebody else.

“Well, sir,” said Delancy, “what is the extent of your bad news, and how much will you take to go away and say nothing about it?”

“Sir?”

“I dare say we shall get on just as well without it,”

added Delancy, dropping into his easy chair. "Sit down, Aynard; this is your home as well as mine, man."

"Is this Mr. Aynard?" exclaimed the gentleman. "Then I am very glad to see you, sir, for you save me a great deal of trouble. I have come from Thirby Cross, where I was directed to find out a Mr. Delancy, at Ilpham, as you were not likely to be at home for many days, and Mr. Delancy might be going to see you. I—I have come on a confidential piece of business from Messrs. Wickens, Wilkins, and Widgen, sir. Can I speak to you alone for a few minutes?"

"Speak here, sir, if you have anything to say," said Aynard, abruptly. "What do my bankers want with me?"

The clerk took a pocket-book from his coat, opened it, and drew forth a cheque which he tendered with a shaking hand towards Mr. Aynard.

"I—I hope that that is not a forgery, sir. There was a little doubt about it after the cheque was cashed, and the principals thought that I had better come down and see you quietly concerning it, as the amount is a large one. The gentleman who presented it, Doctor Day, is a customer of ours, and altogether above suspicion, of course, although—ahem!—we have just heard that he has left England."

Aynard looked at the cheque attentively, and then said slowly:

“The amount is quite correct, sir.”

“That is your signature, then, Mr. Aynard?”

“There is no mistake. I am obliged, however, by the precaution which you have used. Good-evening.”

Aynard tore the cheque into small pieces, which he dropped into the fire-grate, and then bowed out the bankers’ clerk, who departed greatly relieved in mind concerning the doubts which had brought him in hot haste from London.

Delancy looked at Aynard as the door was heard to close below.

“Is it a secret, Hugh?” he asked.

“No. I will tell you presently.”

“I think I can guess already,” said Delancy. “It is the finishing stroke of one who might have been a clever fellow, and who preferred to be a knave.”

“Yes,” replied Aynard; “and, for his sister’s sake, let us forget him and what he is.”

So the curtain seemed to drop between George Day and the friends he might have had; and these two friends, whom George Day’s treachery had brought together and placed side by side, began their lives afresh from that night.

BOOK IV.

THE GREAT MISTAKE.



CHAPTER I.

TOWN.

HUGH AYNARD returned no more to his Roost. The boat-house in the Backwater was deserted for good, and the green light shone not again across the waste. He had begun life with his new friend, and the friend was a stanch one, and understood him. He returned no more to his mansion at Thirby Cross : it was full of gloom to him, he said ; it had been ever associated with distrust and disappointment, and the last shadow was heavier than the rest ; let him be quit of it for years—for ever.

Edmund Delancy endeavoured to change this latter determination, but there were times when Aynard was as firm as his friend. On the question of Thirby Cross

he was inflexible ; he would not see the house again. Leave it to the servants—leave it till it was a ruin, and represented the shattered hopes of its owner. This dreamy talk in the early time, and when he had been the companion of Delancy only a few days. Presently the other's practical manner, his realism, exercised by degrees its effect, and he became less eccentric and stagey. He had lived upon himself too long, and his contact with a stronger and brighter mind did more good for him than he had ever believed in himself.

They left Ilpham before the year was out, and the wild weather set in at Ilpham and in Ilpham neighbourhood, with only Aunt Judge, of all our characters, to stand the brunt of it. Aunt Judge was housekeeper at the great house at Thirby Cross then ; Edmund Delancy had appeared at Thirby to offer her the post at Mr. Aynard's request ; and Mary Judge, after a week's consideration—for she did nothing in a hurry—had accepted it.

“I do not like the idea of the place being left in servants' hands, and Mr. Aynard may come back some day and bring a wife with him,” Delancy said. “It has struck me that the post would suit your quiet habits, Miss Judge, and I think it is one that a lady can gracefully fill.”

Mary Judge bowed, but did not appear deeply impressed by the compliment.

“I have money enough to live upon,” was the reply ;

“ but the situation may suit me. I will think of it, Mr. Delancy.”

When she accepted it the week afterwards, she said, with her usual hard manner for which she has been remarkable in these pages :

“ I should be more grateful, Mr. Delancy, if I thought that you were disinterested in the matter—if you knew me better, or had heard of me as a woman likely to be faithful and diligent in Mr. Aynard’s service.”

“ You forget that your brother told me once in Wolvester how you were saving up for him and Anne ; what a faithful and diligent woman you were in the lower estate to which ill-luck had reduced you.”

“ Yes, I had forgotten that,” Mary Judge said. “ And—you are really disinterested, then ?”

She was determined to keep him to the one question ; and it was hard work to distract the ideas of Aunt Judge.

“ Well, almost,” he confessed at last.

“ I thought as much,” said the future housekeeper of Thirby Cross, and she compressed her lips, either in anger or to keep a smile therefrom ; it was doubtful which, only smiling was not a habit of hers under any circumstances.

“ The fact is, aunt,” he said, to Mary Judge’s intense amazement, “ I am conceited enough to think that I am faithful and diligent too—faithful to Anne, and

diligent in working towards her. I have lost sight of her and her mother. I have let them go as though I cared very little concerning them. I have treated the whole matter lightly, and with a forced cheerfulness and want of sentiment that should set Anne's mind at ease concerning me. I have given her her own way, and I do not mean to intrude upon her before twelve months have passed, and she has tried the new life with Mrs. Judge; but I cannot let every clue to her whereabouts escape me. You will be able presently to tell me where to find Anne, and I shall come to you for the information."

"Is it likely that I shall give it you?"

"You will know where Anne is?"

"Probably. She will not forget me altogether, I hope—I think."

"And she may not be quite happy. There may be something in her letters about that time which will inform you that she is not quite content."

"Well?"

"Then you will tell me where to find her, if I have not by that time found out for myself everything concerning her: for I fancy—mind, I speak with a reserve," he said, with his pleasant smile predominant, "that Anne Judge's happiness will always be the first consideration with you."

"Yes, it will indeed," answered Mary, taken off her guard.

"Then you and I are on one side," said Delancy, very skilfully here, "and we can wait and watch together from our respective posts."

"How old are you?" asked Mary Judge suddenly.

"Six and twenty."

"And you think that twelve months are not likely to make any difference in your romantic feeling for my niece?"

"Not twelve years."

"Or in my niece's sentiments towards you?—after all, only a girl of seventeen."

"She's very young," said Delancy, running his hands through his hair at this suggestion of the matter-of-fact woman before him; "but then, she is older in thought than most girls, and is in her way, and always to me, a heroine. I have more faith in Anne Judge than in myself, even. She will not forget me."

"You do not think it is likely that a woman will deceive you for the second time?"

"Ah, Anne has told my story. No, I do not think it likely."

"Is it likely that Anne will lose faith in her mother instead of you?" asked Mary Judge, abruptly.

"Not exactly lose faith," said Delancy; "but they may not suit each other in all things."

"Mrs. Judge does not seem to you the companion that is most suitable for Anne. Do not deny this: I

read the truth upon your face," said Mary Judge. "Well," with a sigh, "however much they may love each other—as is natural and right—that is my suspicion too, though I try to keep it down, and believe that all has happened for the best. I hope that I am wrong, bitterly and cruelly unjust, after my old fashion, as the mother would say, Mr. Delancy; but when I think that Anne is unhappy, I will tell you where to find her. Till then, you must search for her yourself."

With this promise they separated, and Mary Judge became housekeeper of the mansion at Thirby Cross, and the servants did not detect much difference between Mrs. Holmes and her, save that the new-comer looked more closely after them at all times and seasons, and had not a habit of locking herself in away from them.

Then before the winter set in, as we have before remarked, Edmund Delancy resigned his post of organist at Ilpham, and went to London with Aynard and his mother.

There were high tides that season, and much havoc made round the coast and upon the coast—high tides and winds and rough weather altogether, which gave an extra shake or two to Aynard's Roost, and brought away the boat in which Aynard had rowed to his study on the night Lady Burlinson and he separated, and cast it a broken wreck upon the shore. After

that winter the Roost inclined more towards the land, Ilpham folk said, and it was maintained that it would be a ruin before the spring came, and that the March winds would send it and all within it into the water or the ooze.

But March winds came and went, and the Roost held out bravely, as though expectant of its master still, and confident that the old days must come back by the dark law governing the mind of him who had deserted it.

The spring came, and the early summer, and Hugh Aynard remained with the Delancys in town. Mother and son were both attached to him, and both understood him, and he was like another son and brother to them, one who was very weak, easily influenced, and naturally affectionate—attributes which, by careful studying, were turned to his advantage. In bad hands he would have degenerated ; with these watchful, earnest hearts about him he became a different man, and was thankful for the change which he had not been slow to see in himself. He was intensely grateful for Ned's friendship—for what he called Ned's care of him. If he had not recovered from his disappointment he was resigned to it, and he was a thoughtful rather than a sad man. A strange character to study, and one that required a great deal of study too—which was not begrudged by him whose life Hugh Aynard had saved. A little might have turned him upon his old self, but Delancy

held the key to all his better feelings, and to the master-mind the weaker man gave way.

His affection for Delancy became at last something very touching—more like the love of a sister than of one man for another. He relied upon Delancy in everything—he accepted his advice on all questions without a murmur ; he was always studying to please his friend by those little grateful services which are not much in themselves, but are everything when they are evolved from the natural instincts of good fellowship. In a few words, Hugh Aynard was a changed man, a rational, reflective being, thinking less of himself and of those sorrows which had come in his way, than of the friends by whom he was surrounded, and to whose life he had grown accustomed.

It is probable that the study of music helped in some degree to Hugh Aynard's better estate. He was thrown into contact with a clever man, one who was almost a genius, and likely to excel in his profession whenever he went to work with a will. It was in Edmund Delancy's own hands to become famous, was the whisper that circulated amongst those who knew Delancy best ; there was fire, spirit, originality in everything that he did : and it was asserted, that when the time came for him to attempt a great work, there would follow the success which rewards great works, as a rule. But Delancy, after all, had not settled down. He had something on his mind, which his mother knew, and

Hugh Aynard guessed at, and though he preserved a calm front, and was studious at times, and then at times light-hearted and almost defiant, still he worked on at his profession in a desultory fashion, and made not the way to which his merits entitled him.

He was in a better position of life, and took matters more easily, thought his mother at times, and then the thought would cross her that he was thinking of Anne Judge and inwardly dissatisfied with his promise to refrain from all search of her for twelve months. Once she mentioned Anne Judge to him—somewhat nervously, for she was a timid mother, and there was a decisiveness in his manner that was hard to confront—and he confessed at once that he was thinking of her, and that the kindest act towards himself was to let him think on without any interruption.

“I do not wish the subject introduced to me at any time, mother,” he said, frankly. “I am not fond of parading my sentiments, or of having my sentiments paraded before me; but I think of her, and I look forward to her always.”

“Yes, my dear, but her mother? If she means to keep to her mother all her life—and she’s almost as firm as you are, Edmund—would it not be as well to be prepared for a disappointment?”

“I like firm people,” said Delancy, in reply; “and that is why I like Anne Judge; but I don’t wish her name mentioned for all that, mother—I keep it and her

all to myself for the present. I don't tell Hugh Aynard that I am engaged—or have been engaged—or am going to be engaged—which is it?—to Anne Judge, for he would talk of nothing but Anne Judge for ever afterwards, and worry himself about my feelings towards her, and worry me, too, with a hundred schemes to bring us together, all of which would suit him, but would not do for me. I detest romance—I admire a dry, matter-of-fact existence; this is an exceedingly jolly kind of life now, take it altogether."

"I am glad you think so," answered the mother, with a doubtful glance towards him. "I was afraid that you were tiring of it."

"Oh, no."

"Tiring of the uncertainty in the future respecting Anne."

"At the end of twelve months I shall know all about her future and mine," said Delancy, confidently.

"In your place I would not have kept away from her for twelve months," said Mrs. Delancy.

"Because of the old proverb, 'Out of sight, out of mind?'" inquired her son. "Why, my dear mother, if she can forget me more easily than I can forget her, the twelve months' absence has saved us from a great mistake."

"You are very sanguine, Edmund."

"Why are you not sanguine too?" he asked. "You do not distrust Anne, I am sure."

"No, my dear, but I distrust the mother. I may be very wrong, I may be very hard on a woman who has suffered much and loves her daughter a great deal, but I distrust her in my heart at times."

"Patience," said Delancy, thoughtfully, "and fair play to the woman who has had all the world against her."

Hugh Aynard entered the room at this juncture, and hesitated whether to retire or not upon finding mother and son in earnest conversation.

"I beg pardon, Ned," he began; "I thought you were alone."

"Mrs. Delancy and I have finished our argument, Hugh," said Ned. "Don't run away. Is there any news?"

"Yes, a little news," answered Aynard, nervously. "How did you guess that?"

"You seem very much flustered, as the old women say," answered Delancy. "Well, does it concern you or me?"

"You, my dear Ned," said Aynard, advancing and grasping our hero's hand. "I have found her for you: I have been searching right and left, following this clue and that evidence step by step, link by link, in order to take the weight from your mind which I have seen too well, despite your efforts to keep your secret from me."

"Did I not tell you how this hot-headed fellow would

worry himself to death in my service?" said Delancy to his mother, "and now, by all that is unfortunate, he has found her, and taken the task out of my hands. Where is she, you meddlesome being, who would not let me find her for myself?"

"She is in London."

"In London!" exclaimed Delancy, springing to his feet. "Where?"

"Not a stone's throw from here, and in trouble from which you must rescue her, for it is your right, not mine. There, don't looked dismayed, Ned," he said, "I shall never be jealous of you any more. I am strong now, and my disappointments are all surmounted; you need not think of me, or keep back your true feelings for my sake any longer. I have found her—for you."

"That is very kind of you—but of whom are you speaking?"

"Of Clara Burlinson."

"Well, that is lucky," said Delancy, passing his arm through that of his friend; "and we will march to her rescue together."

CHAPTER II.

ONCE AGAIN.

HUGH AYNARD suffered himself to be led by his friend from the house ; there was no resistance to be offered yet awhile, for he had his own plans to further as well as Ned Delancy had.

It was a strange position, each man anxious to promote the welfare of the other, and each thinking that in securing Lady Burlinson for his friend, he was doing that which was essential to the other's lasting peace.

" You do not know how I have striven for this, Ned," Hugh said, exultantly, as they went along the street together. " How glad I am that the opportunity has come to prove that I am not wholly selfish, or beset with the old morbid passion that consumed me."

" You wish me to marry Clara Burlinson ?"

" Yes," was the answer ; " she loves you, and pride must not stand in your way to keep you both apart— you two who were born for one another."

“And you, who love her so well—whose whole life she has influenced so much—can give her up to me?”

“The love that I have for her, Ned, would make her happy at any sacrifice. It is not the mad passion which I raved about when we were at the Roost together for the first time, and I was jealous of you.”

“No, you have improved since then,” said Delancy, drily, “and there was room for it, you know.”

“How strange it is that you can jest at a time like this, that in the most serious moments of your life you are always most frivolous,” said Aynard.

“But, my dear Hugh, this is not the most serious moment of my life,” said Delancy.

“Right, it is your happiest, for it unites you to—”

“It is of no use going on like this any longer,” cried Delancy. “You are a man with one idea, which there is no shaking out of that weak head of yours. I am not in love with Lady Burlinson.”

“You try to think not, you try to spare my feelings.”

“The last time we were at the Roost, I told you that I was going to marry some one else.”

“It was kind of you. I understand more fully now the motive which led you to deceive me. But, Ned,” said Aynard, “you will marry Clara, now that all can be explained and all mysteries set right.”

“I shall marry some one very different from Lady

Burlinson," said Delancy, "and I will tell you her name when we get home, and every chapter of the story. You shall promise me faithfully, and on your bended knees, not to excite yourself and me by intruding upon that story in any way, but to leave me and the heroine to ourselves, and the story to work round by itself. For you are a terrible fellow to interfere, and to scheme for other people's happiness, neglecting your own too, which may be more palpable and sure. Now do you understand me?"

But Aynard's mind clung to the one idea with which it was full. He set all this down to Delancy's firmness—to a forced indifference which the meeting with the old love would dissipate—even to a consideration for himself, in whose greater strength no one yet believed. The "some one else" was a lady in the clouds, born of Ned's fancy, that was all; but the woman whom Delancy loved, and for whose sake he was still a bachelor, was approaching to him, and they would never part again. All the old protestations of his friend, Aynard forgot, or could no longer believe in: those protestations were uttered when Delancy thought that he had been jilted; but now that he was sure that Clara had been faithful to him, he would turn to her with his old passion, and forgive the great mistake by which he had nearly lost her.

This was Aynard's reasoning, and Delancy relinquished all hope of shaking it on that day. He left it

for time—for the working out of his own scheme, by which he should prove to Hugh how greatly he had been mistaken. Meanwhile, let him marvel at the improvement in this man, who had been so impulsive, weak, and jealous—this man who would have killed him for loving Clara Burlinson, and who now, still loving her himself, sought for her sake and his friend's to bring about their marriage. A noble nature, that had been perverted by strange circumstances, and was developing anew—a nature that should be rewarded yet, Delancy thought, now that the power was in his hands.

They turned down a narrow street in Gray's Inn Road, and Delancy said "Here?" in some surprise.

"Yes, in this place; and we not knowing of this, Ned—we two who would die for her."

"Ah, yes," said Ned, less extravagantly and yet sorrowfully. "Poor Clara, this is a terrible drop for her. How did you discover her?"

"I have been tracking her for many weeks from the house which her brother's creditors wrenched away from her. I have set others to search also, for I have been troubled about her, and feared this. Ned, I knew that I had only to bring you two together——"

"Yes, yes; but don't begin that all over again, please," said Delancy, interrupting him. "You have been very kind, and I am extremely obliged. What are you stopping for?"

"That is the house—with the white blinds—Number Seven."

"Come along, then."

"Oh, not I," said Aynard, recoiling at once, even setting his back against the wall, as though he expected that Delancy would have recourse to main force to drag him along. "I have found her for you—not for myself. I could not see her. I have not the courage or the nerve to face her. Presently, Ned, I shall be strong enough to offer my congratulations, I have no doubt."

Delancy looked at his friend with great interest. Aynard's confusion, even shyness, was evident enough; and he saw at once that Hugh's absence would spare both Lady Burlinson and Hugh a great deal of embarrassment.

"I think that my mother should have undertaken this task," said Delancy. "I am a good mind to go back and fetch her."

"Pray see her yourself. You can give her advice; she can rely upon you," urged Aynard. "I hope that you will not go back."

"Well, I will see her, although she may not thank me for my intrusion. Poor Clara, she was always a proud woman."

"But you understand her pride. You can by a few words conquer that so easily, Ned, and end for ever this long, miserable misunderstanding."

“Do you object to going home, Hugh, instead of talking this nonsense? I tell you for the hundredth time that I do not love her; that I am never likely to love her.”

“You are not kind to say so, for I can bear the truth.”

“I will give you a dose of it when I get home, then. I’ll not wait another day, however you may worry me afterwards,” said Ned, laughing. “Now, return to my mother, and send the old lady on here. When a woman is in trouble, one of her own sex can only comfort her, and I am not sanguine as to the good my appearance is likely to create.”

“Pray see her; do not hesitate again.”

“Well, after all the trouble that you have taken, Hugh, perhaps it would look a little ungrateful.”

“I will go back and send Mrs. Delancy to you. She should share——”

“The bother of this—exactly,” said Ned, quickly; “and whilst you are about it, tell my mother to give strict orders concerning the dinner—on the table punctually at half-past four, for I am frightfully hungry already.”

Aynard looked up with disgust at this practical and unromantic demand, and then smiled faintly at his friend.

“You are a good actor, Ned,” he said; “but I have not known you so long, not to read you like a

book at last. You are most serious when you feign to be the least concerned. Success to you, old fellow. I shall not be more unhappy because you are less so. I am prepared and strong — have stood too long in the way and marred everything, not to rejoice at this."

"And if you stand too long here, and forget my directions, you'll mar a fine sirloin of beef. There, don't frown like that: I am going."

"You are not worthy of her, after all," murmured Hugh. "To save my life I could not talk as you do, however forced the jest might be."

"No, I am not worthy of her," answered Delancy: "and that is the very reason——"

"Her name is Mrs. Burlinson at that house," cried Aynard, who would hear no more irreverent remarks. "Be kind to her; think what she has suffered."

Then he hurried away, and left Delancy to follow his adventure to the end, and to prosecute that little plan for Aynard's happiness which Ned believed that he saw a short way ahead of him.

He knocked at the door, and when his summons had been responded to, inquired of the servant if Mrs. Burlinson were within.

Mrs. Burlinson was within. Would the gentleman please to state his business, or send in his card?

He sent in his card, and waited patiently in the narrow passage for the answer thereto. If she refused

to see him, he thought that he should not be greatly astonished, and he would be spared a meeting that could only give pain to both of them. After all, it was his mother who could offer consolation in this place so much better than he. There was a long silence in the front parlour, into which the servant had passed—the card of the new-comer had evidently taken the mistress by surprise, and he was the last man whom she had dreamed of meeting.

The servant re-appeared at last, and asked him to step into the room, and he entered and shook hands once again with the old sweetheart, who was trembling somewhat with the surprise from which she had hardly recovered at his appearance there.

“I thought,” she murmured, “that I had effectually hidden myself away from all of you.”

“Or that the friends had hidden themselves effectually away from you, Lady Burlinson,” he rejoined.

“Hush, I am not the lady here; that would be too cruel a mockery, even for me,” she said, sadly. “Will you sit down?”

“Thank you.”

Then they sat down opposite one another, and Ned Delancy thought that she was looking pale and worn—a woman who had lost some of her beauty with her lover and her fortune, and yet whose face was very pleasant, with a new and earnest expression that he had not seen before.

“I am sorry——” he began, when she checked him at once.

“You will spare me your sympathy, Mr. Delancy,” she said, quickly. “I do not know that condolence with our losses is ever consolatory—in my case it only adds to my grief. I have deserved to drop to this, I think.”

“No, I think not.”

“I was too easily led to scheme for my advancement, and this is a fair return for all my plotting.”

“May I ask what has become of your brother?”

“I do not know—I am waiting for him.”

“Indeed !”

“I believe that he will come back to me a penitent man—that he will be glad of this poor home, of the shelter that it affords, and the love that he will find here. Faithful to one at least, you see,” she added, almost bitterly, and with that strange boldness in facing painful subjects which he had noticed once at Markham’s Hotel, Ilpham.

“I do not think that he will return,” said Delancy, thoughtfully.

“He will think of me, alone in the world, and struggling to keep a home for him. He will not forget me—he was never wholly bad.”

Delancy had a different opinion upon this point perhaps, or Lady Burlinson thought so, for she said :

“You cannot understand my affection for him. He was false and treacherous to you—there, I know that,

for he confessed it to me, and was sorry for it," she said; "but his last act was to leave me, rather than that I should share his disgrace."

"Yes, his last act was a very praiseworthy one," said Delancy, drily, as he thought of the cheque in Mr. Aynard's name. "And now, what are you doing in this out-of-the-way street?"

"I am earning part of my living—or trying to earn it—in that way," she said, with a forced smile, as she pointed to a water-colour drawing on the table.

"So complete a fall as that!" said Delancy. "That villain must have robbed you as well as—other people, then. He could not spare even his sister."

"He thought to add to my wealth, and he was mistaken, as others have been mistaken before him. Do not seek to set me against him."

"I should not be your friend did I not warn you of putting trust in him again," said Delancy. "You do not know, Lady Burlinson, how dangerous a man he is."

"I believe that he will return to me a better man."

"Such men never improve," said Delancy. "But forgive me, I am paining you, and I have not come to talk about your brother."

"I wonder what you have come for?" she asked, regarding him curiously, "for our meetings have not been happy ones of late years, Mr. Delancy."

"If we had never met at Ilpham, you would have been a happier woman, you think?"

“Yes, I think so.”

“I think so too. And yet, looking back at all that has happened since that meeting, and looking forward hopefully to all that may happen, I do not regret the past,” said Ned. “In good time I see the man whose pride you wounded coming to your side again, for he is faithful, and forgets nothing.”

“Right, he forgets nothing,” said Lady Burlinson, “and I do not reproach him. I treated him unfairly, and my humiliation was well deserved. To my side such a man as he will never return.”

“I think there you are in error.”

“If his pride did not stop the way, Mr. Delancy, mine would. And yet I have respected him more—felt my own unworthiness more since our separation. But,” she added, impatiently, “it is not to speak of Mr. Aynard that you are here to-day?”

“No, it is to ask you to become my mother’s friend again—not to hide away from her, but to let her offer you a woman’s sympathy, and save you from long hours of solitude in this place. The days—after all, the pleasant days—at Thirby Cross are not so long ago that you should turn away from her.”

“I am better by myself. I am not fit for friends,” she said, dashing a few tears from her eyes. “By myself I feel more strong and self-reliant. It is kind of your mother to think of me. But——”

“But a woman alone in the world is an anomaly,”

Delancy interrupted here ; “ and a woman who has suffered, or is suffering, requires a sister’s help and counsel. I cannot leave you thus—you are of the old days that we have shared together, Clara.”

He could speak more plainly to her than he had done for five years, for no misunderstanding could follow his words, he felt assured. He believed that in her heart there was love for Hugh Aynard, and that she betrayed it despite that pride of which she had spoken, and she knew that he loved Anne Judge, and was waiting for her. For ever after this no idle jealousies, no misconceptions—and he in good time like the brother whom she had lost, only a brother in whose honour she might rely.

And Lady Burlinson hesitated, for she was a woman who had wavered all her life, and Edmund Delancy was in earnest, and had set aside all that forced levity in which on occasions less impressive he was accustomed to indulge. He was eloquent and persuasive, for he was working in his friend’s interest, just as Hugh believed that he was working for him. Delancy saw ahead of him the pleasant finis to a love story that had not run smoothly in its course, and the reward of these two weak beings’ thanks would be sweet to him when all the cross purposes were ended. He had been deeply touched by the present position of one who had been a lady born, and he was anxious to place her in her fitting sphere, the stronger and

the better woman for all the trials that she had undergone.

Mrs. Delancy arrived before he had completed his arguments, and then Lady Burlinson broke down and cried in the elder woman's arms. Clara was very miserable, she was very much alone, and her heart was touched by this sympathy and kindness. She had learned to believe in the desertion of her friends when adversity had overtaken her and she had passed from Harley Street to her lower life, and the coming of the Delancys was at last too much for her.

Mrs. Delancy was not inclined to take the credit to herself, however, and Hugh Aynard's name was on her lips, when a look from her son arrested the confession. That explanation was to come later in the evening, when Lady Burlinson had met Mr. Aynard at the mother's house, and they had begun—and only by way of a beginning—to regard each other as commonplace acquaintances. Delancy knew how it would end after that—what fuller explanation would ensue, and what forgiveness and new affection follow.

He thought of all this when they were taking Clara Burlinson home with them. He rejoiced at all this as the cab turned the corner of the street in which they lived.

In his impatience he leaped from the cab and asked the servant where Mr. Aynard was before Clara Burlinson and his mother had alighted.

“He has packed up and gone away, sir,” was the reply. “There’s a letter for you on the mantelpiece.”

“Did he say when he should return?” asked Delancy, too anxious to wait for the letter’s explanation.

“He said that he was going a long way from here—going for good, sir.”

“Is he, by George?” exclaimed Edmund Delancy; “we’ll see about that, though.”

He saw about that the next morning, the next week, a month afterwards, peering with eagerness into the misty depths wherein Hugh Aynard had vanished, but seeing him not again.

Hugh Aynard had brought the lovers together, and then, not strong enough, as he thought, to sit quiescent there the silent witness of a happiness that he had hoped once would have been his, he had stolen away for ever.

CHAPTER III.

A WANDERER.

IT was a long letter that Hugh Aynard had written to Edmund Delancy. We need not present it in detail to our readers, for it was rambling, discursive, and too full of vain repetitions concerning the passion that had existed between Delancy and Clara Burlinson, and the happiness that now lay before them both. The writer took credit to himself for having brought the old lovers together ; he had schemed for that end, he wrote, and the end having come, and he having proved his unselfishness, it was best to go away from them, lest further misunderstandings should arise from his presence in their midst.

He alleged that as his excuse, but it was not that which had induced him to pack up hurriedly the few things that he required, and leave Delancy's house for good. He had not the moral strength to face the woman who had deceived him, and whom he had

reproached ; he knew that it would be torture to him to watch her happiness, to stand as a witness to that engagement which would follow now, and for ever shut him away from the woman he still loved. He had done his duty, and not without a struggle ; the fierce, jealous heart-pangs which, in the earlier days, would have completely mastered him, had seized him more than once, and had been with difficulty repressed. He looked on Delancy as his brother, as his one friend who had been kind to him, who had understood him, and devoted almost his sole attention to him, the friend who had changed his nature, and rescued him from one who might have been his greatest enemy—himself.

It was better for him to go away, lest that old eccentric, half-mad self should come back. He did not know even yet how far he might be trusted, what envy and despair might do for him to reduce him to his old level. Let him, whilst he was strong, begone on his way : when the wound was healed, when they were married, and he could face them and receive their thanks for the interest which he had shown in them, and the great error shadowing their lives which he had rectified, he would be Delancy's friend again, and there would come to him content at last.

Delancy understood all this, though the letter treated more of his future than the writer's ; he read in the hastily-written, blurred epistle much affection for himself, much of the future hopes of Hugh Aynard. He

was grieved that so unceremonious a departure from his house had been taken, but he hoped that the explanation was only delayed for a few days or weeks, and he waited patiently for Aynard's second letter. Hugh had promised to write when he was settled ; he was going a long distance, and his friend, he said, need not fear that the old morbidity would return and take him to his Roost in the Ilpham Backwater ; but three or four weeks passed before a letter arrived, and then Aynard confessed that he was not settled yet.

“ I am not a miserable man, Ned,” he wrote again, “ and thoughts of your felicity are pleasant to me ; but I am restless, and find a gratification in a constant change of scene and place. I shall not tell you my address, for you would follow me, and seek to dissuade me from the resolution to which I have come—to see no more of you and those who are dear to you and me, till you are married to Clara. When I hear of this—and the news will not escape me—I will face you once more, and be grateful for your friendship. Forgive my weakness, or my strength, and pray believe that I am content, and waiting.”

“ ‘ Content and waiting ! ’ ” said Delancy, “ and yet restless, and beset with my old mania for wandering to and fro. If I could only find a clue to him ! ”

There was no clue to him in the letter, however, and the post-mark was Liverpool, where a man like Aynard

was not likely to remain an hour longer than was necessary.

“I will wait for the next letter,” said Delancy; but the next letter, full of more information or better news, was never written to the friend.

“When the twelve months are up, I may meet him on my own journey,” said Delancy, “for I set forth in search of Anne Judge, her aunt’s permission and co-operation conceded or refused. They will have been twelve long, weary months of waiting for me; but Anne will thank me for my patience, and not be sorry—somehow I feel sure of this—that I have once more stepped upon the scene to shake all resolutions. I see the end so clearly now.”

But the end was afar, and at that time was wisely hidden from him, or he would not have sat thus calmly in his study, biding the time that was not his, and was so unlike the truth. All had come true as he had prophesied up to that day, and he had become more sanguine of ultimate results in consequence. He was a man of great faith in himself—of a dogged nature, that resisted difficulties and pushed on to the goal. His mother and Lady Burlinson were friends, they saw each other very frequently, and Clara was more gentle and less worldly. This was the beginning of the end in which every one—thanks to himself, he added conceitedly—should be as happy as the day was long. He had sketched out his own plan for everybody’s felicity

—even that of Mrs. Judge, who would fall in with his ideas, and give her daughter and her blessing to him whenever they should meet.

He was troubled alone by the mystery wherein Hugh Aynard was enshrouded, for he abhorred mystery, as the reader is aware, and he was not certain—not quite certain—of the strength of mind of his absent friend. Hugh Aynard might fall into designing hands and become their dupe; or he might resist them, and pass on unscathed. It was fortunate that he was naturally reserved and naturally suspicious, and that it took time to understand him. Still, Delancy would feel more at ease when he heard from him again.

Meanwhile, where was the man whose absence perplexed Delancy? The progress of our story leads us to him, and we turn to follow those steps which altered for better, for worse, the fortunes of every one of our characters. Hugh Aynard's last rash step was momentous, and brought about more than he had ever dreamed of.

When he wrote that last letter to Edmund Delancy, he was in Liverpool. Before it had left his hands an hour he was on board a coasting steamer which was bound for a Welsh seaport; later in the day he had begun a walking tour through North Wales, a pale-faced, large-eyed, melancholy tourist, who shunned the coffee-rooms of all the hotels and the company assembled therein, and preferred his own society at most times and

seasons ; a man who made no friends, and chose strange routes—purposeless routes, which brought him more than once to the same place, and which he scarcely seemed to recognize again ; a man who was fond of long distances and of tiring himself out ; who admired after his fashion the scenery around him, and lingered on mountain-tops and in tortuous glens till the night stole on him, and there was a difficulty in finding his way to habitable quarters ; a man who spent his cash freely, and demurred not to any bill which was presented to him ; who sought out the poor in his progress, and left money in their hands ; and who was remarkable, had there been any watchers like ourselves to follow in his footsteps, for an intense curiosity in the first sheet of the *Times*, which he sought in each town and village, and now and then waited days for, when his wanderings had taken him to remote parts of the kingdom where the London papers came late to hand.

“What is there to wait for now—why are they not married ?” he would say after a diligent perusal of the first column ; and then he would carefully re-read the long list of marriages again, lest by some impossible carelessness the names should have escaped him. “I shall find the announcement in to-morrow’s paper,” he would say at last ; but that morrow never came, and he was still dissatisfied. Somewhat anxious, too, for he looked down the grimmer, sadder list that follows marriages in newspapers as well as life, and is the

end of all things, and breathed more freely when there was no name there to bring tears into his eyes.

“They cannot misunderstand each other now—there is no one to interfere with them. A firm man—in some things an unforgiving one—is Ned ; but to the woman who has loved him so long, he will be surely generous. I have no need to disturb myself about the end of this—it is advancing ; I shall know in time.”

He wandered on, lingering the longest at those villages and towns which bordered on the sea, as though the sea was always the fairest and the most loved resting-place for him. In the autumn, and when visitors were growing scarce, he arrived at Llandudno for the second time. Earlier that year he had strayed to the place, and found it full of people who were making high holiday between the great dark hills there, and he had shunned it till the winds had risen and the sea was rough, and he was sure that those who loved summer weather had fled the place at last. Then he returned, and for the first time since his wanderings was disposed to rest awhile, and to wait for the news which was so long in coming to him. How long this new mood would last he could not tell, but there was a strange longing for peace in him, and he felt that he should be glad to see the faces of those from whom he had detached himself. He would wait there till Delancy was married ; the news would reach him speedily enough, he thought, and then a few hours would take him back to them, and they

should see what a hale man he had become. He felt the temptation once or twice to return immediately, but he resisted it. The old superstitious fears crept forwards when the impulse was upon him to go back—fears that he was an unfortunate man, and brought ill-fortune to all with whom he came in contact—fears that something strange would arise from his presence amongst them at the eleventh hour, and that nothing would come right or end rightly if he were hasty in his actions.

“Dear old Ned,” he said ; “I think that he will be as glad to see me as I shall be to see him. And when Clara is his wife I can become her friend too, and feel no envy at her happiness with him. Am I envious now ? Heaven forgive me if I am !”

He would row out to sea somewhat recklessly at times, and when troubled too much by thoughts akin to those which we have recorded, and before he left the beach the boatmen would warn him of his rashness, and give him directions concerning the currents and the wind. They found out at last that he was a good oarsman and a fair sailor, but they were not the less nervous concerning him, for the weather did not daunt him, and he was not too prudent. It was the old longing for isolation from his kind which took him out at sea there and drifted him to and fro in his frail craft—the old longing that had rendered him fond of his study in the Backwater, and made Ilpham folk

doubtful of his sanity. He was never at his best when he was too much alone, and it was not a wise resolve that thwarted his impulse to return. He was too confident that he was acting judiciously, even when his solitary position began to prey upon him, and many gloomy thoughts to return and gather slowly their old strength around him.

He was conscious at last of his weakness, and he began to think that it was time that he strapped his knapsack on his back and set forth once more upon his purposeless journey. He had communed too long with himself, and there were no faces that were welcome to him there. Another day or two and then he would go. He would think seriously once more of returning to London, and having thought of that and resisted it, he would once more begin his travels.

He was thinking of that, and resisting it over again effectually, by all his own miserable train of self-reasoning, at ten o'clock at night, as he sat on one of the benches facing the sea, and smoking cigar after cigar with a rapidity that savoured of the old times too. The place was lonely enough at that hour, and on that night, for the waves were tumbling in between the sullen Ormes Head, and the wind was coming fierce and strong from the sea. There were lights in the houses still occupied by visitors upon the terrace—lights in up-stair windows and on the higher ground at the back of the town, where the cliff met the villas

there and hemmed them in, but there were no late visitors on the Parade, and the wild night that had kept them indoors, or sent them early to their beds, suited with Hugh Aynard's frame of mind.

At last a second comer, as full of thought as Aynard, appeared upon the scene—a woman, in a long dark cloak, and with her bonnet pulled forwards over her face, who walked up and down the Parade very quickly. She had noticed Aynard at the first, and given a furtive glance in his direction, before forgetting him and all about him for awhile in her own particular train of thought, and Aynard, who had glanced as suspiciously towards her, had now turned his face towards the sea, and had begun another cigar before returning to his hotel.

Had Aynard been more interested in the movements of this new comer, he would have seen that she paused in her perambulations, at the corner of a street leading away from the sea, very frequently, as though expectant of some one who would come in that direction presently, and that finally, as the hour grew late, she came nearer to the bench on which he was sitting, and walked once between him and the sea, and glanced at him again.

But he did not look up ; he had forgotten where he was—the lateness of the hour, the coldness of the night, and the loiterer like himself—in the deeper channel to which his thoughts had drifted, and it was not till the woman came at last suddenly towards him, and

spoke in a harsh and excited voice, that he returned to passing things.

“Your pardon, sir,” she said very quickly, “but have you been sent here by your friend to wait for me—sent by one who was to have come himself at this hour?”

“No, madam,” replied Aynard, very sternly; “I am not waiting for any one.”

“I beg your pardon again, but it seemed strange that you should be here at this hour, and that he should not. What can have detained him?” she muttered, as she turned to retrace her steps.

Aynard did not reply; he had objected to this intrusion on his thoughts, and had doubted the excuse which had led the stranger to address him. He rose, and was turning in the direction of his hotel, when the woman, who had moved away from him, paused, and then came back.

“You have not noticed a gentleman here, this evening, sir, at an earlier hour—before I came?” she said. “I would not trouble you like this,” she continued, apologetically, “only it is a matter of some importance to me.”

“I have been on the Parade alone for the last two hours.”

She raised her head to look him in the face, but when he glanced at her with more attention, she recoiled at the recognition which ensued between them, and for

which she was as unprepared as he. It was a surprise to both of them to meet in that place and at that hour. Each was troubled; for from their last meeting had been evolved serious consequences and many changes.

“Mrs. Holmes—Mrs. Judge,” he said, correcting himself. “Surely it is Mrs. Judge?”

“Yes, it is I, Mr. Aynard,” was the answer given, and the late housekeeper at Thirby Cross and the master of the great house that had been so long deserted looked at each other timidly, as though there were harm to follow their new meeting.

CHAPTER IV.

A FADING VISION.

MRS. JUDGE was the first to recover from her surprise.

“This is a strange meeting, Mr. Aynard,” she said ; “and to you, I doubt not, an unwelcome one.”

“Why an unwelcome one?” he asked.

“In our last interview I told you a hard truth,” she replied ; “and you thought that I was actuated by revenge. I hope that you have since done me the justice to believe that it was consideration for the man whom I served.”

“All was for the best, but it was a heavy blow,” he said, mournfully.

“At which you are repining still, Mr. Aynard,” she said, quickly. “I am sorry to see that.”

“No, not repining,” he answered ; “I have long since recovered from the shock, and can look my disappointment in the face. I thank you now for opening my eyes to the truth.”

“At any cost I would have done that.”

“ You were a faithful friend,” he said, “ and I am not sorry to meet you. What are you doing in Llandudno? Is there any way in which I can serve you before I leave this place?”

“ No,” said Mrs. Judge, proudly. “ You forget, sir, that by my husband’s death I came into property, or rather my daughter Anne did, for Mr. Judge left her all his money in a will that he wrote on the last day he spent in Wolchester. That was the day before his death—which I think sometimes was a judgment upon him for his cruelty in trying to rob me of my child. I tell Anne so, but she does not like me to speak my mind, Mr. Aynard.”

“ Your daughter Anne is well, I trust?”

“ She is not quite well, and I have brought her here for a change. We have been living at Aber, which has been too dull for her, and has depressed her too much. She has not served so long an apprenticeship to isolation as you or I have.”

“ No,” said Aynard as they went slowly together along the Parade; “ but you and I have recovered from the desolateness of our lives. I have a dear friend in Edmund Delancy, and you have found a daughter to love and cherish at the last.”

“ A daughter who sees in me a woman repentant for her great mistake,” said Mrs. Judge, “ and taunts me not with the past which I have outlived. A good girl, who has left the world to share my life, just as she

would have left me and the world to share her father's. Not that the father was ever as kind to me as he was to her, but a cold-hearted, proud, repellent man, who distrusted me from the first because I was young and he was old."

"Where are you living?" asked Aynard, anxious to change this subject of discussion, upon which Mrs. Judge seemed inclined to grow eloquent.

"At the back of the town," said Mrs. Judge. "Our property is not so large that we can afford to live in any grandeur. Not quite two thousand pounds—which, after all, is a poor pittance for two. Had it not been for my own small savings added to the interest, I do not know how we should have lived at all. Life with me has been always a struggle in one way or another; it will be so to the end."

"You must be very happy with your daughter," said Aynard.

"I love her very much," answered Mrs. Judge. "I would lay down my life at any time to save hers, or to serve her. Oh yes, I am content in my way. I should be more so if she were content too."

"Not content," said Aynard; "I am sorry to hear that. At Thirby Cross she was an earnest girl, but not a discontented one."

"She was thinking of her father then, or of—— May I ask how Mr. Delancy is, and what he is doing?"

"He is very well. He is still practising music."

“Not married?”

“No, but about to be married.”

“Indeed—to whom?”

“To Lady Burlinson.”

“It will be a good match,” said Mrs. Judge, “although a woman so false as she did not deserve to win the old lover back. I never liked Lady Burlinson,” she added, almost vindictively.

“You had no opportunity of judging of her character,” said Aynard; “she is an affectionate, if weak woman.”

“One who treated you very badly, Mr. Aynard,” said Mrs. Judge, who was not disposed to give way in her opinion of Lady Burlinson.

“One who pitied me with all her heart. I cannot hear a word against her, Mrs. Judge.”

“I have nothing more to say. I bear no malice. I have been all my life a most forgiving woman.”

Mr. Aynard thought that Mrs. Judge had no occasion to sound her own praises so persistently. He was somewhat astonished also at her volubility, for in his service, and with the exception of a few special occasions, he had scarcely heard the sound of her voice. A grave-faced, taciturn woman, whose gravity and reserve had agreed with his own; now, one inclined to talk freely to him, as to an equal in position, and oblivious to the fact of their past relations. Still, he was not sorry to meet her; he had been so long a stranger to his kind

that there was a satisfaction in encountering even this eccentric inhabitant of his old world, and in knowing that one whom Lady Burlinson had loved was within a stone's throw of him.

"Your friend will not keep his appointment to-night," said Aynard, as a clock in the town struck eleven.

Mrs. Judge started at this remark.

"Oh, no friend of mine," she said, with a carelessness that was a little overdone, "a commonplace acquaintance whom I knew some years ago, and to whom I intended, for charity's sake, to give a little money."

"Perhaps he is at your house."

"Very likely," she added. "I think that I will go home and see. When do you leave Llandudno, Mr. Aynard?"

"In a day or two."

"Then we may have the honour of seeing you again," she said, more submissively, and more like the late housekeeper of Thirby Cross. "My daughter Anne, I am sure, will be glad to hear news of all old friends, and to talk of the days together at the great house. Should you meet us again," she added, after a moment's reflection, "it might be as well not to mention that I have seen you, I think."

Mr. Aynard looked surprised at this, and Mrs. Judge explained her reasons in a hasty manner.

"Anne has become a nervous girl, and a little excite

her and throws her back in health," said Mrs. Judge speaking very rapidly. "I am far from strong myself, and have to feign a strength I do not feel lest she should become nervous concerning me. When she is asleep and thinks that I am at rest, I steal out of doors for the fresh air that I need—and it revives me, and gives me courage to bear up. I am a great sufferer, Mr. Aynard."

"I am sorry to hear it," he answered, bewildered still by Mrs. Judge's manner, and not able to account for all its varied phases.

"I seldom sleep—it requires strong drugs to make me sleep, and even they are failing in their effects," she said. "I pray for sleep as a man dying of thirst prays for water, and it comes not."

"I understand you," said Aynard. "I have known the misery of long sleepless nights myself—the torture of unrest which nothing cures—the longing for the daylight which shall take the horrid thoughts away that are born of darkness, and then the craving for the night again in the hope that rest will come at last."

"Have you felt such misery lately?"

"Yes. It is stealing back to me, I fear; but I will not go home until Delancy is married."

"Why not?"

"No matter what my reason is," said Aynard, suddenly becoming more reserved, "I think that it is a just one. I will bid you good-night now, madam."

"I hope that in the morning we shall see you on the Parade. We shall meet there for the *first* time. Good-night, sir."

"Good-night."

Mrs. Judge extended her hand, and he shook hands with her for the first time in his life. He was not quite satisfied with her exhibition of friendliness, although unable to define where his objections lay. He was not a proud or an austere man ; he had always liked Mrs. Judge in her capacity of housekeeper, and considered her a woman above her station in life ; he was not an unmerciful man, and he did not let her past errors stand in the way of her new penitence. He knew a great deal of her story, and it had awakened his pity. But for all this, he did not like Mrs. Judge's new manner towards him, and he was not quite certain after all that he was glad to meet her at Llandudno.

He went into the hotel thinking of this, and Mrs. Judge turned towards her own home, after a last glance down the deserted Parade. As she turned, she uttered a cry of surprise, for her daughter Anne was close upon her, and she had believed her sleeping peacefully at home—her daughter Anne, who had become a taller and more graceful woman since our last meeting with her.

"Mother," Anne Judge said, almost sharply, "what man is that ? and why have you left the house like this to meet him ?"

“I don’t see what right you have, Anne, to dog my steps like this,” said the mother. “What has made you so suspicious of me lately?”

“Your own manner, which is strange enough—that manner which keeps something back from me.”

“My dear Anne, it is all your own nervousness—this new and strange disorder, against which I have begged you to fight, lest you kill yourself and me.”

“I am not nervous, I am not ill—only worried.”

“What has made you leave your room, and come in search of me, but nervousness?” said Mrs. Judge. “And I was only anxious for fresh air before I tried to sleep.”

“I could have accompanied you.”

“And been anxious about me all the night, wondering if I were restless and wakeful, and thus remaining restless and wakeful yourself, and making my heart ache to see your pale face in the morning.”

“Who is the gentleman that has just left you and gone into the hotel?” asked Anne, naturally curious on this point, and not inclined to postpone the repetition of her question.

“A gentleman whom I have met to-night by accident,” said Mrs. Judge. “A friend of yours, not of mine. I have no friends, Anne.”

“Save one,” said Anne, more gently.

“And she torments me—she is suspicious of me—my own daughter, who should have every confi-

dence, knowing how deep and strong my love is for her."

"There, I will torment you no longer," said Anne.
"Let us go home ; there is no need to wait here."

"You do not ask who the gentleman is now?"

"I am trying to think. Not Mr. Delancy, mother?"
she said, with sudden eagerness.

"Oh no, not Mr. Delancy. What should he do here ? I have given you long since my opinion of Mr. Delancy."

"Please do not repeat it," said Anne, decisively.
"He was always very kind to me. I do not think that he has forgotten me, or is likely to forget me."

"Is it any use for him to remember you, even if his memory were a better one than it is ? Unless," she added, jealously, "I have tired you out."

"I am with you still," said Anne. "I am not tired of you, mother. Who was this gentleman, then?"

"Mr. Aynard."

"Indeed!"

"He has come to Llandudno for change of air, like ourselves ; but with a face as hard and gloomy as the Great Ormes' rock beyond there," she said, as they turned into the street wherein they lived. "He has not recovered from the trick which that hateful woman played him, and which I laid bare—spoiling for ever," she added, with a scornful laugh, "her chance of becoming the mistress of Thirby Cross."

“ Why speak ill of her too ? she was my friend, mother. Had she known what was in her own heart, she would have never accepted Mr. Aynard as a suitor.”

“ Oh, she is a heroine in your estimation, I have no doubt,” said Mrs. Judge. “ You see faults only in the mother, and the rest of the world is superlatively good. She won upon you very quickly, and I thought at one time, before she tried to send me away, that it was a fair opening in life for you. Great Heaven ! a fair opening in life to become a superior lady’s-maid to her.”

“ Hush, mother, please.”

“ She was an enchantress, I believe—in the secret of the love-philters and the charms of which we have read in books. Well, Anne, she has enchanted away all the passing fancy of the organist for you.”

They were before their own apartments, and Anne, who had opened the door with a latch-key stopped and looked back at her mother.

“ What do you mean ?”

“ That Mr. Delancy is going to marry Lady Burlinson.”

“ Mr. Aynard has told you this to-night ?”

“ Yes. He expects to hear of the marriage every day.”

“ I don’t believe it—I can’t believe it yet.”

They passed into the house, and went cautiously into

the front room for fear of arousing the landlady, who had been asleep some hours. A light was burning on the table, and a fire flickering in the grate, before which mother and daughter took their seats.

Anne sat down, and slowly unfastened her bonnet-strings, gazing at the fire very intently as she did so. Then her shawl dropped from her slight figure, and she clasped her hands together and shivered as with cold.

“ After all, I was only a child,” she murmured.

“ You are beginning to believe it then, Anne,” said Mrs. Judge, leaning forwards, and taking her daughter’s hands within her own. “ If you had believed that he was like the rest of men, vain, fickle, and heartless, it would have been better for you, months ago. I have seen how you have brooded on him, how he has stood between you and me; and, had his passion been more than a common sentiment, in good time I would have resigned you to him, and gone back to my solitary self without a murmur.”

“ I don’t know that I wished him to think of me too much; that was unfair to him if I did, knowing that my life was yours, and that you had been for many years a most unhappy woman, shut out from all companionship and love. But I fancied that he would not easily forget me, for he was different from others, and he never said in all his life a word that he did not mean.”

“ And you did, and he took you at your word,” said Mrs. Judge ; and though there was still pity in her voice for the daughter, there was a faint ring of satire beyond that was not pleasant to hear. Truly, a strange mother this, and we need not marvel at her troubles much, or at her want of happiness even in these latter days.

“ Yes, if he is going to marry Lady Burlinson, he has taken me at my word,” said Anne, with a brighter look upon her face ; “ and I told him a year ago how deep had been her love for him. I wanted him to marry her, for I knew that it was a folly to think of me, or to waste his life in dreaming that my resolution was likely to change. If he has taken me at my word, I am sure that he will be happy, and I can say, Heaven bless his wedded life, with all my heart.”

“ Had he come here, your resolution would have wavered ?”

“ No.”

“ You have not been content with me,” the mother said, gloomily.

“ Because you have not been content with yourself ; because I have not always pleased you, and you have been afraid of my love, and how long it would last ; because you are jealous, excitable, and not always kind.”

“ Forgive me, Anne ; I am a miserable woman

enough, I know that," she answered, "but I think of you too, a great deal, despite all my wretched ways. I am quenching the light and life from your young heart, and you do not complain of me. I will be a better mother from to-night."

"Only a mother more considerate now and then," said Anne, with forced cheerfulness. "We are beginning to understand one another better every day."

"But you are suspicious of me, Anne, or you would have never followed me to-night," said the mother, in reproof again.

"I was in doubt where you had gone; fearful, as it grew late, what had become of you."

"I have been a little eccentric lately," said Mrs. Judge, by way of half apology, "and I have thought more than once that the house in Thirby Cross, combined with all my troubles, helped to turn my brain more than ever Mr. Aynard's was turned, for I am a fool in many things—a weak, inconsistent fool."

She pushed back her grey hair with her hands, and stared before her wildly; and the action reminded Anne of that time long ago when the mother came to her bedroom in the dead of night to beg for her intercession with the mistress.

"That house at Aber was too dull for us," said Anne; "you were right enough, though I loved the mountains and the quiet Glen where no one came

to disturb us, and where you seemed to love me better for awhile—or in a different manner."

"Ah, that is the nervous nonsense from which I have tried to rouse you, and which you may have inherited from me," said Mrs. Judge. "There, there, we'll not say any more to-night, or the sleep will never come. And yet there is one thing more which I should like to say."

"Indeed!"

"That I am not wholly selfish—that you must not think so, however jealous I am; and that if Mr. Delancy—though I never liked him much—had come to this Welsh spot to-night instead of Mr. Aynard, I would have said, 'My daughter will be happier with you than me; take her, sir, away.'"

"Would you have said that for my sake, mother?" said Anne, leaning over her and kissing her; "then I could not have gone from you after that, and left you to yourself."

"And yet you are not ashamed to tell me that you love him?"

"Not ashamed—no."

"Now you know that he never loved you; that his was a shallow sentiment at the best, and he was not worthy of your deep affection, girl?"

"Oh, but I know he was," said Anne. "I see him on his sick bed; I meet him in my aunt's house; I hear every word that he says so boldly, earnestly, and

with such deep truth in his voice, and though I—shall not be sorry to learn the news of his marriage Clara, I don't believe it yet awhile."

"Is not Mr. Aynard likely to know?"

"I cannot tell. Mr. Aynard is a strange man, and I am thinking of Ned as I saw him last."

"But——"

"But do not spoil the picture, mother, or come between me and the light again. As he stands there, let me look at him and believe that he remembers me. If the light dies out to-morrow, why, it will be for the best, for I was never fit for him ; but for to-night leave me to think I was."

She kissed her mother again, and went up-stairs to her room, where she tried hard to realize the vision of which she had spoken, and to nurse the romance that seemed fading rapidly away from her. Did she believe in Ned Delancy—his faith and his strong will —when she prayed later that night that he might be very, very happy with the woman to whom he had been engaged once, and whom, perhaps, in his heart he had always dearly loved ?

CHAPTER V.

FADING MORE AND MORE.

HUGH AYNARD met the Judges on the following day. It was natural that they should meet, for each of the three had a secret desire for the meeting, although not one of them would have confessed to the motives that influenced the wish.

Hugh Aynard, with his better estimation of human nature, felt that even the presence of his *ci-devant* housekeeper was a relief to him in that gloomy seaport, and that Anne Judge would be a friend to him whom it would be pleasant to encounter. Anne was of the bright days which he had known for awhile, and Clara had loved her as a sister, and spoken of her warmth of heart and her affectionate disposition. The bright days had vanished away, but Anne Judge, after all, had not vanished with them ; she had not altered like the rest of them, and he thought that he should like to meet her, and talk of Delaney and Clara, and of the gladsome time it was at Thirby Cross before the

troubles came. She would speak of Clara Burlinson to him, and he could listen with composure—with pleasure, knowing that Clara was happy, and that all mistakes were ended now for good.

And Anne Judge was secretly anxious to meet Hugh Aynard, for he had seen Edmund Delancy last, and had told her mother of Delancy's coming marriage. That seemed precipitate, if natural, and she yearned for the whole truth, and yet shrank in her heart away from it. The whole truth would assure her that Edmund Delancy was no more a hero than the rest of men ; simply a man who had been interested in her for awhile, and had, under peculiar circumstances, been grateful ; who had spoken words of sentiment in which he had believed, and thus had made them sound like truth to her ; and then, knowing that she could never be his—assured of this, for all his show of confidence, and meeting the first love, free to marry him, and full of affection for him—he had very naturally fallen in love with Clara Burlinson again, and sank the bitter reminiscence that had stood so long between them.

She could understand it all, but she thought that morning, as she walked towards the sea, that she should like to hear the story in its entirety from the lips of a man on whom she felt she could rely.

Thus these three characters of our story advanced towards a new perplexity when they met on the breezy Parade of Llandudno, one cold September morning.

There was no difficulty in meeting thus; there were not a dozen people before the great terrace of houses which had planted their Belgravian fronts between the two Welsh hills. The grand company from London, the infinitely grander company from Liverpool and Manchester, and all the musicians who had played to that company and given an air of life and gaiety to the place were but sparsely represented by two or three invalids in Bath-chairs, who were staying to be braced, a nursemaid with a rickety child in irons, and an Italian organ-grinder, who had made a great mistake in branching from Conway in this direction.

Aynard saw Mrs. Judge and her daughter the instant that they appeared on the Parade, and went at once towards them. They had come there as if to rescue him from his loneliness; to give him new courage to wait for the time when he could return to his friend Delancy and—Delancy's wife!

"This is an unexpected but a pleasant meeting, Miss Judge," he said, "and I am grateful to Fate for it."

"Has Fate anything to do with it, Mr. Aynard?" said Anne Judge.

"Perhaps not," he added. "I am not the fatalist that I used to be, thanks to Delancy, who fought hard to keep my superstitions down. You remember that?"

"Yes, I remember that," said Anne, thoughtfully.

She remembered it and him, and she thought it was strange that the name of the one whom she was curious

concerning, should leap to the front in the very instant of their meeting. It was all that she could have wished in her inmost heart before setting out that morning, but now she shrank from the topic, feeling she could not dash at it in that hasty fashion.

She asked if Mr. Delancy were well.

“Yes, he is well. That is, he was well when I saw him last,” he said, correcting his statement. “I have been wandering about the country for a few months away from him.”

“You have not quarrelled?” asked Anne, quickly.

If they had quarrelled, she would not believe in Mr. Aynard’s statement.

“Quarrelled with Delancy!” cried Aynard in astonishment; “the most unselfish fellow upon earth. Whatever made you think that that was possible?”

“You are apart from him—you know nothing concerning him,” said Anne in reply.

“He has been like a brother to me, he will be like a dear brother to me again when I meet him, Miss Judge, but I have not the courage to meet him yet awhile.”

He looked down mournfully as he said this, and Anne felt that it would be premature to force his revelations. Mrs. Judge was not so delicate, and had no consideration for the old master. She was a woman who spoke out at times we are aware, and she owed now no allegiance to the Aynards.

“I cannot understand the weakness that keeps away from the best friend, because he is going to marry a woman for whom both have professed an attachment.”

Hugh Aynard appeared for an instant startled by this abruptness of Mrs. Judge, and his face assumed a shade or two of extra gravity. He could have borne with that question from Anne Judge, for his conversation had appeared to lead to it, and he had implied already that he was weak, and still suffering from his disappointments ; but the remarks of the mother were not to his taste. A worthy woman she had been in his service—a faithful one to the last—but still not the woman whom he desired for a confidante, or whom he should be ever able to respect.

“It has been difficult to understand me at times, Mrs. Judge,” he said, quietly ; and then they went along the Parade together until the mother paused at the bench whereon Hugh Aynard had sat last night and watched the white-crested waves roll into the bay.

“I am tired,” she said ; “a little tires me after a bad night’s rest. I think that I will sit down for awhile.”

“The wind is high and cold this morning,” said Anne.

“It will do me good, and brace my nerves, Anne,” was the answer of the mother, who evidently required bracing with the rest of the visitors who lingered there.

“Are you going to walk on?” asked Aynard.

“Yes, for a little way.”

“If you will allow me to accompany you, Miss Judge, I shall esteem it as a favour.”

Anne bowed, and then the two went on together. Mrs. Judge leaned her elbow on the arm of the bench, and took her chin in her hand, to watch those two, and on her white, lined face—still an anxious, world-worn face in the daylight—was a thoughtful look, that was almost cunning in its intensity.

“Strange for those two to be together here,” she muttered, “and walking along thus, as though they had been friends all their lives. It would be like fate indeed if he could be made to love my girl, and raise her above all of them. She is worthy of a better life than with me, wretch that I am! I wonder if it’s possible?”

Possible, with Anne so young, Aynard so weak, and she so deep a schemer for her daughter’s happiness—a daughter’s position above the people who had once treated her like a servant. What a triumph it would be, what a success, for which both would be grateful, for Anne could not have a richer husband, or he a better wife.

“She would be happier away from me,” muttered the mother, as she clutched her chin forcibly with her gloved hand; “and without a stroke of good fortune like this to make amends for all the misery and

temptation still about us both, I do not know what will become of us. I cannot see the end."

Meanwhile, Aynard and Anne Judge had walked slowly away from the woman who had begun already, like a match-making mother as she was, to see a chance for her daughter if she let things take their course and interfered not. They went on together, and Anne had not to start for herself the topic on which she was anxious to dwell for awhile, before dismissing it for ever.

She had no claim on Edmund Delancy—she had never been engaged to him; but she was very, very curious concerning him.

"Your mother is a plain speaker, Miss Judge," were Aynard's first words; "and, after all, plain speaking is best. I did not reply to her last remark as I should have done, considering it was a lady who addressed me, and one who has already proved herself my friend. But then she never liked Clara, and you did."

"Yes, I thought once that we should be very near and dear friends."

"You should have been. Clara is an affectionate woman, and lately a friend's advice and solace would have been of value to her," said Aynard; "but then, of course, there was the mother between you and her."

"She will find comfort again without my help," said Anne, with an artfulness that was almost worthy of her mother. She led up to the subject, but she would not be the first to mention Edmund Delancy's name.

“Yes, she will find great happiness, for she will marry the man whom alone she has loved. And after two great and bitter mistakes, brought about by a brother’s scheming rather than her own rashness, she deserves happiness. Miss Judge, you knew that she loved him?”

“Yes, I knew that,” said Anne.

“It was very natural that she should, for I was a foolish fellow, with not an idea in the world that was worth anything, and he is clever, and good—immeasurably above me in all things save the accident of wealth. Well, the error is rectified, and there is no more misunderstanding between them. They are going to be married.”

Anne had heard this yesternight; but her heart fluttered as violently as though the news were fresh to her. She was not prepared even yet for the truth, for she had pictured Delancy as one day crossing her path again, despite all her energetic protests, and saying still he loved her. She would have been glad to hear those words again, and to protest again—less strongly, perhaps—against his pertinacity; and now the time was never more for her, and the cold, bleak life beyond that day seemed coming to her across the angry sea.

“Are you sure of this, Mr. Aynard?” she asked with a faltering voice.

“I should not be here, Miss Judge, on the mere

supposition," he answered. "I should be in London, working for the happiness of both of them. I brought them together; I found her out for him when she was hiding in a mean street in London; and he took her at once to his mother's home,—the most fitting place for her. I saw him lead her from the cab; I noticed what a flushed and radiant face his was at last, and I said, Heaven bless him with her, before I turned away—the coward, who could not share their joy; who wished it with all his heart, but could not witness it."

"He took her to his mother's house," said Anne, thoughtfully. "That was very kind of Mr. Delancy; but is it a proof of his affection for her?"

"Miss Judge, I have been his most intimate friend since he left Ilpham. I have shared and seen his anxiety for her day after day—the false pride with which he thought he had disguised his love in his consideration for my feelings, although I have read him like a book."

"Mr. Delancy has never seemed to me a man likely to forgive her completely," said Anne Judge, still unconvinced. "He is a proud man at heart, and the woman who confessed that she loved him, and then married another man, seems not to me the one most likely to become the first in his regard."

"She loved him always, you know that for yourself; he knows it too, for it was my duty to tell him before

they met again ; and now, with the truth to face, with the mother as mediator, with one roof over them, and with all her love and beauty constantly before him, is Delancy the man to hesitate?"

"He may have learned to love some one else."

"He may have professed to love," said Aynard ; "have hoped to love in time some one as worthy of him as Clara is, but it was a sentiment, not a passion."

Anne winced. Did he know her secret ? had Edmund Delancy confessed to him as much as that ? If so, let her forget her lover ; let him step from his pedestal and away from her, for this was no hero of a girl's dream, but a commonplace man, nothing more. It was evident that he had done so, or else that he had not mentioned her name to Mr. Aynard—he who should have been too proud to keep her in the back-ground if he had really loved her. There had been much talk of Lady Burlinson between them, but not a word of poor Anne Judge. She professed to have wished this—to have seen that it was best for Clara to marry Edmund Delancy ; but still she thought, with a swelling bosom, that he might not have forgotten her so completely.

No, she could not believe it—he had confessed to Mr. Aynard that he had mistaken gratitude for love, and interest in her strange life for love ; he had been weak and easy to impress when he lay ill at Thirby

Cross, and had said much of which he bitterly repented now Clara Burlinson was free to marry him, and he knew at last how much she had loved him.

And then she doubted again—doubted as she walked by the side of Hugh Aynard, in whose word she could trust, whose motives for concealment she so readily understood. For Delancy had stood his ground well in the face of her cold resolutions, and had said that he would wait twelve months and then seek her out again, and his words had sounded so like truth that they had never left off ringing in her ears—a sweet music which was strongest and had the loudest echo in her heart when her mother was most eccentric and hard. True, the twelve months had passed, and he had not sought her out, although there was a clue to her at Thirby Cross, she thought, exactly as Delancy had thought before her; but she would wait awhile.

She endeavoured to change the subject, but it was a vain attempt, Hugh Aynard having but one topic to grow eloquent upon. So they both spoke of Clara Burlinson and Edmund Delancy—both acknowledging how fit they were for each other, and how right it was that their long quarrel should be ended thus.

They met every morning and evening after that. Mrs. Judge cared not to go further than the Parade, and Aynard sought them there. He was alone in that Welsh seaport, and his past wanderings had rendered

him the more inclined for the society that he had met at last. Anne Judge had been Lady Burlinson's companion and confidante, and it was very pleasant to hear of Clara from her lips. And to Anne Judge this man before her was Ned Delancy's friend. He could speak of Delancy in a way that one man seldom speaks of another without verging on burlesque, and Anne saw that he had been very miserable apart from his friend, and guessed whither his solitary thoughts were leading him before she crossed his path again.

The September month died away, and the bleak October came; they were still at Llandudno, and met every day. Mrs. Judge was a silent and a patient woman. Her ambitions were excessive, but she understood her daughter, and would not mar events by any officious intermeddling. Anne was interested in the gaunt, weak mortal whom she had known at Thirby Cross, and he was interested in Anne Judge—that was the beginning, and the mother thought that she had only to watch and wait, leaving for time the dénouement.

Late one night she was thinking in her room again of this. Sleep had not come despite her efforts. She was restless still, and she sat in her arm-chair by the dressing-table and tried to sleep, and could only think of her daughter and Hugh Aynard.

Suddenly she was startled by the rattling of a handful of small stones against the window-glass.

“He has come at last,” she muttered, then she rose, put on her bonnet, and, late as was the hour, stole softly to the landing-place, listened for a moment at the door of her daughter’s room, and then went downstairs and into the darkness of the night.

CHAPTER VI.

THE BEGINNING OF A NEW CONSPIRACY.

MRS. JUDGE closed the door softly behind her and went into the street, where a man was waiting for her. He turned away from the sea and preceded her by a few yards until they were in a wider part of the new town, a very silent place at that hour. Then he stopped till she came up with him.

Her first words were a reproof.

“I scarcely expected to see you again—you had got the money.”

“I promised to come,” was the reply.

“Ah, you always keep your word,” said the other, scornfully; “for ever to be relied upon, and especially when in distress, is George Day.”

“Hush, you may be heard,” said the man, glancing nervously round.

“There is nothing against you save a few debts—nothing which you have told me, at all events.”

“No, nothing against me.”

“ You are poor still,” she said, after looking at him attentively ; “ the money has done you no good—it has gone the way of all the rest.”

“ It was staked at Baden,—and lost,” answered the other, moodily.

“ And you want more ?”

“ I am ashamed to confess as much,” he said, as he walked on by her side with his hands thrust to the depths of his empty ; pockets “ but you are the one friend whom I have in the world—who, after all, has been more faithful to me than the rest of them.”

“ And has less cause to be so.”

“ I cannot own that,” he answered, “ for our lives have been, in one way or another, connected for many long years, and they need not be sundered now. I am prepared to make every reparation.”

“ You have said that before,” said Mrs. Judge, in a low tone, “ and yet you keep away.”

“ At your wish, lest your daughter should raise an objection to our marriage, and in the hope of becoming a less wretched creature than I am, before I ask you to share the remnant of my misspent life. It was atonement for the past wrongs that led me to seek you out again ; it was a poor reparation to offer you for all the misery of which I had been the cause, but it was made with all my heart, I swear.”

“ It was a great offer, considering how old a woman I was looking, but then you were poor, and looking

twice your age yourself : but it was only an offer, and it ended in an appeal for money."

"I am a beggar, but I am not a wholly bad man," he murmured, plaintively.

It was his old protest against the world's opinion of him ; and though, in that threadbare suit of black, with that battered hat upon his head, and with that absence of beard, which had never been allowed to grow again, we should have scarcely recognized George Day—the man who might have been famous and fashionable, and preferred to be a scamp—still, the injured tone of voice raised against the society which had been too hard upon him, was the old tone which no adversity could alter, and by that we know him.

We need not listen to all this dialogue between a foolish woman and a weak but utterly unprincipled man. There have been many women as eager to believe in the false, and as true to their mad passion, as Mrs. Judge—ready at a moment's notice, to forget all the past indifference and scorn. A woman, this, who had loved once, and that unwisely—who had been full of remorse as she had become more and more convinced of her guilty lover's apathy which he termed remorse himself—who had left him and yearned for her daughter's love and forgiveness as the one comfort for her remaining years ; but who was not too old or too hard of belief to feel pity for the man who had influenced her life so much, and to be half ready to believe again, and for all

her knowledge of his character, in his empty protestations.

She taunted him with seeking her for her money, but she was flattered by his remorse and by his expression of a wish to make the only atonement that lay in his power. She had thought at times, and when she was housekeeper at Thirby Cross, the very worst of him ; now, in her better estate, and with her mind diseased by drugs and sly drinking, she was disposed to believe the very best. It was a mania, perhaps ; but it was a natural one in the wild, wayward character that we have endeavoured to depict, and George Day was cognizant of it and made his profit from it ; and then George Day was in earnest—terribly in earnest—and so might have deceived clearer minds than Mrs. Judge's. He always spoke as if he meant every word that he said, the reader is aware ; and for the time, and whilst the fit was on him, he did believe it, and deceived himself as well as others by his earnestness. It was this idiosyncrasy which had rendered him so dangerous a character to meet, and so difficult a one to comprehend.

Chance had thrown him in the way of Mrs. Judge, and he had found her in possession of money, and in a new position of life. He was very poor, and she was rich by comparison ; she pitied him, and he spoke of their old passion for each other. He fancied at times that if he married her, he would be doing her a tardy justice, and that she would be very grateful and give

him once more a home. So they met at times, and it was thought advisable to say nothing to Anne Judge concerning their future intentions.

They walked up and down the street for an hour, talking earnestly ; he fell into the truly penitent mood after awhile, and mourned over the chances and the good name that he had lost, sparing not himself one jot in his reproaches, and calling himself a villain of the blackest dye, who had considered no one in his selfishness. Oh, for one more chance to be presented to him ; for life to open out afresh, and he with a new name, in a new world, to do his best for those he loved !

He was so much in earnest at last, that he offered to marry Mrs. Judge before the week was out—to set forth with her to that new world of which he had already spoken, leaving Anne to accompany them or not, as she might wish. He was utterly alone ; he could not face his sister, for he had ruined her, and she was happier without him ; but here was one woman in the world who could understand and pity him, whose life he had shadowed, but to whose remaining years he would devote himself.

“I will wait till Anne is married,” said Mrs. Judge, who always hesitated at the last, as though the little grain of commonsense within her floated to the surface. “She may marry soon—I hope that she will. It is all nonsense to talk of devoting her life to me, for she is

very young, and I, Heaven forgive me! am not a good mother to her. I never was—I never can be."

"What gentleman was that with her and you this morning?" asked Day.

"You were in the town this morning, then?"

"Yes—but I cannot show myself in the daylight, or respectable society would hiss me through the streets," he said, bitterly.

"That gentleman was Mr. Aynard of Thirby Cross," replied Mrs. Judge, somewhat proudly.

"Mr. Aynard!—he has altered very much. I saw you all at a great distance, but I ought to have recognized him. Surely he is not likely to marry your daughter Anne?"

"I cannot say. Sometimes I hope he will. He is very glad to be with us, and that is certainly a good sign."

"He should have married poor Clara," said Day, thoughtfully.

"Your sister Clara is going to marry Mr. Delancy."

"Is that true? Is that possible?" were the eager queries.

"Mr. Aynard is my informant, and he is Mr. Delancy's intimate friend."

"Now, out of evil comes good, and I am glad of that," cried Day. "She has loved him for a long while, and she deserves to be happy with him. To think that I saved him for her, when the devil tempted me to take

his life, and you saw the devil in my face that night and warned his mother of me. To think that Clara will be happy at last. Bless her—she will make him a good wife, and he deserves one."

After this outbreak of pathos, he said, with an inward drawing of his breath :

"This Aynard is very rich, and very eccentric. Stubborn in some things, but in others awfully and unnaturally weak."

"He is a different man from the master whom I served at Thirby Cross," said Mrs. Judge.

"He might be made to love your daughter, I think," said Day, reflectively. "You have only to arouse his interest, to lead him to believe by his vanity—all madmen are vain—that Anne Judge is thinking of him too much, and he will be grateful for the affection that estimates him at his worth."

Mrs. Judge shook her head.

"I have no faith in plotting to win him for a husband," she said. "He must love my daughter of his own free will, not be asked to love her. She is too good for him—for anybody whom I have ever met. Unselfish, affectionate, thinking always of other people's happiness, and never of her own."

"A charming character," said Day. "What a wife she would make Aynard, and what a son he would make you, placing at your disposal some handsome home to keep you independent of the world—a little estate,

perhaps, which we might sell, and which would start us afresh in America."

"I never thought of that," said Mrs. Judge ; and then the two walked on together and talked of Aynard's weak mind, and how readily it might be influenced, as it had been influenced before, by the arch conspirator who had returned upon the scene to weave his plans anew. He saw at a glance that it might be worth while to marry Mrs. Judge—that profit to himself and atonement to her might march arm-in-arm together.

Mrs. Judge, like a good mother, would wish to see her daughter comfortably settled before she married him ; and now that Hugh Aynard had quarrelled with Clara Burlinson, and Clara was about to marry Ned Delancy, what could happen better for Anne Judge and the master of Thirby Cross, than that they should join hands together at the altar ?

It was a plot in which the most upright could participate without a blush, and therefore George Day offered Mrs. Judge his valuable advice and assistance.

CHAPTER VII.

GOOD NEWS.

THE bleak November weather found the plotters and those who were being plotted against still at Llandudno. The cold winds that rushed from the sea between the Great and Little Orme, had not daunted Hugh Aynard, or Mrs. Judge and her daughter.

Hugh Aynard waited for the news, still reading the first column of his paper very carefully each day, and wondering why they lingered so long, knowing what kept him away from them. He was stronger and better again, and the fear of facing them in London was less acute. He believed that he had the courage to surprise them even by his appearance in their midst, and he thought that presently he would make the attempt, lest something should have occurred in his absence which he had not foreseen to break off Ned Delancy's marriage. At all events, he would write in a few weeks, and let the mystery around himself vanish away. They would be glad to hear that

he was well and strong ; that he had found companions in his wanderings, and that Anne Judge was almost like a sister to him, frank, gentle, and kind at all times, and whom he felt bound, for associations' sake, and out of respect for Clara, to consider as a valued friend.

Hugh Aynard did not like Mrs. Judge in his heart the better for a more intimate acquaintance with her, although she exerted herself to become his friend, and to prove that she had been something better at one time than his housekeeper, and was something better then. Her past service to him did not stop the way to his regard ; he was too generous in his thoughts for that. She was an eccentric woman, but then he was an eccentric man, and should have made every allowance, it might be thought, for eccentricity in others ; and she was a woman moreover, who, however fretful and capricious in her moods, loved her daughter with an intense affection. He saw this, but he did not admire Mrs. Judge—he was not satisfied with her. He was puzzled at times by the strange manner of his first meeting with her at Llandudno, and wondered faintly—for it was no business of his, and he was not an inquisitive man—for whom she could have been waiting on one cold, misty night in last September.

Still he was not suspicious of her ; she had been too faithful a servant of his house, and had acted too frankly towards him, to be distrusted now ; and there

were times when he accused himself of not treating Mrs. Judge with that courtesy and attention which her genuineness and her new position warranted.

He liked her frankness at least—she disguised nothing ; but he was not quite certain one day whether she had not been too frank with him, and sowed the seeds of a new trouble in his mind.

She came on the Parade alone, and Aynard missed the daughter at once. He had been so accustomed to see them together—they had become so much a part of his morning, as it were—that he said at once :

“ Where is Miss Anne ? ”

“ She is packing up our boxes, Mr. Aynard,” said Mrs. Judge ; “ not a very arduous task, for after all our wardrobes are not very extensive.”

“ Packing up—you are going away, then ? ”

“ Yes, living at Llandudno is very expensive, and we have two rents to pay whilst we remain here. Anne is well again, and we think of leaving for Aber to-morrow or the next day.”

“ This is a surprise,” said Aynard, thoughtfully.

“ It is a sudden resolution of Anne’s rather than of mine. She is tired of the place ; it is cold and bleak here now, she thinks ; and yet Aber is as cold, and the sea is almost as near to our cottage as it is to this Parade.”

“ She may have another reason for going.”

“ I think she has.”

Mr. Aynard was silent for a few moments, and the two walked on together. He was a man who spoke out his mind very freely at times, and when a doubt perplexed him, and he said at last, and with a suddenness that startled his companion :

“ You do not like to tell me what you think is the real reason for this sudden resolve to depart ? ”

“ Scarcely , ” answered Mrs. Judge in a nervous manner.

“ Shall I tell you that I am the cause ? ”

“ You , sir ? Oh , Mr. Aynard , what makes you think that ? ”

“ I have stayed too long here , and become too intrusive , ” said Aynard , leaping very readily to the conclusion which he had formed . “ I have been in the way , and forced myself too persistently upon your daughter’s notice . I am sorry ; but her best friends are mine , and it has been pleasant to talk of them to her . I was completely alone before you came here , ” he added , apologetically .

It was Mrs. Judge’s turn to explain . If she had desired to lead him to this subject , she could not have more cleverly brought him towards it than he had brought himself . The game was in her hands , and the cards were easy to play .

“ Mr. Aynard , I will be frank with you , ” she said , looking fearlessly into his face , and discarding all her previous exhibition of nervousness , “ for you must not

part from us with so unjust a thought. Although it is my daughter who suggests a wish to return to Aber, yet I am glad of her resolve. It is a relief to me—it saves me from a great anxiety."

"I do not understand," said Aynard, with a quick glance in her direction.

"Pardon me for speaking out to you, but I have not a habit of concealing what is in my mind. You are the master still, the gentleman, and I am the housekeeper whose duty it is to disguise nothing. I do not think, then, that it is fair to see Anne so frequently, to make her your companion, almost your confidante. You will pardon me, but she is a young and impressionable girl, who has not mixed in society, and it is better for her and me that we leave here."

Aynard glanced at her again. His hand trembled as it twitched at his moustache for a moment. It was his turn to be nervous now.

"Still—I do not understand," he said.

He could not believe it possible that a woman could be thinking of him in any tender fashion ; that it was likely he, a weak fellow at the best of times, should have the power to influence for a moment the thoughts of a pretty girl.

"I do not say that my daughter is in love with you," said Mrs. Judge, austerely, and even proudly, "or is likely to be in love with you, Mr. Aynard, but I second her determination to leave here lest she knows her own

heart better than I do, and would spare herself a trouble. She looks ahead a long way, and I know the difference between your position and her own, and cannot see any good to follow up this intimacy. There is no harm done yet, and therefore it is better that we go to Aber.” .

“ Ye—es,” said Aynard, hesitating still, “ it may be best.”

Mrs. Judge changed the topic after this, and shortly afterwards spoke of business in the town and bade him good-morning. She had turned away, when he overtook her, and said :

“ I shall see you both again ; you will not go away without a word ?”

“ That would be unkind—ungrateful, Mr. Aynard.”

“ Thank you.”

He left her to resume his wandering up and down the Parade, finally to stretch himself full length on the shingle, and to ponder on the confession recently made to him—at first to smile at it, as at a something inconsistent and unnatural, and then to feel perplexed thereby.

The mother’s nervousness, he thought had suggested a solution to the daughter’s wish to return home, and it was wide of the truth, as hasty conclusions generally were. It was a folly from beginning to end, of course, and even Mrs. Judge was not certain—nay, had told him that there was no harm done.

But the harm was done to Hugh Aynard, for he

thought of Anne Judge all the morning, and of the pleasant time it had been lately at Llandudno, with her to speak of Thirby Cross, Clara, and Delancy. The time was at an end, and he would be alone again—for ever alone in this world ; a something purposeless, for whom no one cared a great deal, and whom no one seemed to miss. If it were possible to believe such a story true as that Anne Judge was falling in love with him—an affectionate, true-hearted, wondrously faithful and unselfish girl—if it were even possible to believe that in time and by his assiduity he could win the love of such a one as she, what a happiness in the future might stretch out before him !

He should never love her as he had loved Clara Burlinson, with that wild, irrepressible longing which was like romance, and had proved as unreal to him ; but with every day, that deep affection which would make his life at last a happy one, would gather strength, place by his side some one whom he could trust, and raise him for ever from the misty lower land wherein he had encountered nought but the bitterness of disappointments. Here might be his last, his best chance, and what pride of birth or ancestry should bar the way to her, if he were assured that he could love her ? What an end to all the troubles, too—his past morbidity vanishing away in the bright smiles of his young wife, the merry laughter of his children. Thirby Cross a place of gladness, not of gloom, and dear old Ned

and his wife coming to see them very often, and to laugh with him, in good time, at all the mistakes which might have been, and which were ended then for ever. The picture was too bright for him—the contrast was too strong, and the weak man felt the tears rising to his eyes and rendering all things misty. He sprang to his feet, and went out of the town and along the road to Conway at a headlong pace, as though he would out-walk his thoughts, which kept step with him and were not to be dismissed that day. He returned to his hotel with them; they shaped his dreams, and kept him restless.

The next day he met Anne Judge and her mother together; they had come on the Parade expressly to see him, and to bid him good-bye. They were going away that afternoon.

“ You said to-morrow, or the next day ? ” he said to Mrs. Judge; “ I was reckoning, I don’t know why, on the latter period ”

“ Anne thinks that it is better to leave at once than to sit about our lodgings with the boxes packed,” said Mrs. Judge.

“ It keeps one unsettled, and I am anxious for home,” Anne added.

She spoke to Mr. Aynard rather than in reply to her mother, and then looked down embarrassed—for the first time in her life embarrassed at his earnest, thoughtful look towards her. He was embarrassed

himself then, and his heart leaped strangely under his waistcoat. It was pleasant to think that this girl might be sorry to part with him, despite all her eagerness for home.

“I shall have Llandudno quite to myself after you ladies have gone,” he said ; “but I shall leave in a day or two if I am very miserable, very lonely. May I come to Aber ?”

Anne, who was still looking down, did not reply ; but he fancied that her face flushed for an instant with a deeper colour.

Mrs. Judge did not answer herself, and there was an awkward pause, which brought the colour to Aynard’s cheeks as well.

“I hear that there is a very fine glen there,” he said, to relieve the silence that had fallen upon them all, “and I am a tourist in search of the picturesque.”

“It is a pretty spot,” said Mrs. Judge ; “but best seen in the fair summer weather.”

“Then, with your permission, I may pay you a visit if I venture there ?”

Another pause, broken by Mrs. Judge’s voice, saying, “Of course, we shall be very happy to see Mr. Aynard as he passes through the village—shall we not, Anne ?”

Anne could only assent to her mother’s question, with the object of it waiting for her answer there. Then they shook hands, bade each other adieu, wished each

other pleasant journeys upon their various ways of life, and so departed.

Anne Judge and her mother were at Aber in the afternoon ; the train rattled them away from the Welsh watering-place to the village at the mouth of the Glen ; and home, if not the peaceful thoughts appertaining to it, was once again before them.

It was not till the evening of that day that Anne said very suddenly and warmly :

“ Why did you say that you should be very happy to see Mr. Aynard, and then appeal to me to confirm your wish ? ”

“ What could I say ? ”

“ It, would have been better to have spoken the truth, and said that our home was small, not fit for him, and that we were not anxious for fresh faces round us,” said Anne, with excitement, “ if what you think of him is true ; which it is not—which it cannot be ! ”

“ I did my best to evade his question—I did not answer it at first,” said Mrs. Judge. “ I said that the Glen was best seen in summer weather, and I added, almost with emphasis, that we should be glad to see him as he *passed* through Aber. What more could you expect me to say, without being rude and foolish ? What did you say yourself ? ”

“ It was a difficult question to parry,” said Anne, with a sigh ; “ and I do not know that there is any

cause to wound Mr. Aynard's feelings. I am glad that we are at home."

"Presently you will be wishing that you were somewhere else," replied the mother, sharply, "for you are always discontented."

"I am sorry that you think so," was the quiet answer.

"You are discontented with me, at least," said Mrs. Judge, pursuing the argument. "I am always to blame; I have always done wrong. When I tell you that I think Mr. Aynard is falling in love with you, you are amazed, horrified, eager to get back to the place from which you were just as eager to escape some weeks ago, offended with me for suggesting a vague and foolish idea to you—then believing that fact yourself, and upbraiding me for showing common civility to one who has been your friend well as mine."

"I am a little inconsistent," said Anne, sorrowfully; "but Mr. Aynard was to be trusted, I thought, from thinking of a girl like me—he had been always my friend; he was attached to Lady Burlinson."

"Is a man to fret eternally for the one who has jilted him, or a woman for the man who has amused himself by professing to love her?"

"The man or the woman would be very weak to do so; but Mr. Aynard is weak. After all, mother," she said, her face brightening more, "he is not in love with his housekeeper's daughter."

“I am not his housekeeper,” was the angry answer ; “do not fling my past servitude in my face.”

“You are not your usual self to-day, mother ; you are excited.”

“I am worried.”

“Are you sorry that I have brought you here, scared by a suspicion ?” she asked, anxiously. “Supposing for an instant that your idea is a true one, and that the master of Thirby Cross is likely to fall in love with me, are you sorry that I evade his attentions in this manner ?”

“Yes,” Mrs. Judge said, frankly, “I am.”

“You are tired of me ! The novelty is over : the girl’s devotion to her mother, and her mother’s better life, is a thing of every day ; and all the past wishes, the past extravagance of thanks, were a something very like play-acting, then ?”

“No, Anne, don’t think that,” cried Mrs. Judge, earnestly. “You know that I am very grateful for all that you have done for me—for the love which you have shown, and by which you have rewarded my unworthiness. I am not forgetful of the sinful wretch that I have been, and I value the forgiveness and love I sought and found in you !”

She clasped her daughter to her, and kissed her long and passionately ; she wept bitter, scalding tears in her arms, which tightened round her as she cried there.

“Then we need not be separated,” said Anne; “for ever together to the end, and with no regrets to trouble us.”

“When you were at Thirby Cross, I used to think of the unattainability of such a happiness as this, and feel that I must be content with your notice, your common liking for an upper servant in the house in which you were a guest. One night, in your sleep, I cut off a lock of your hair as the greatest prize which I could secure in life. I yearned and prayed for you with all my heart and soul, Anne; and I am at peace now, though you may not believe it. But still I am worried—still I feel that it is my duty to make a sacrifice in my turn, and I should not be sorry to see you Mr. Aynard’s wife.”

“Why not?”

“For his sake, who is a desolate man, for one thing; and for the sake of yourself, in the second place. You would soon love a man whom you already esteem and feel a pity for, and your position in the world would be for ever secured.”

“But not for your own sake, mother?”

“For my own sake too, then,” said Mrs. Judge, “for I am uneasy—terribly uneasy in my mind. I cannot see what is to become of us when the money is gone.”

“Is it likely to go?”

“Anne, forgive me, it is almost all gone,” cried the mother, suddenly falling on her knees and burying her

face in her daughter's lap. "I must tell you—I cannot keep this a secret from you any longer—I have spent the money which you gave me to bank in my own name."

"In what way?" asked Anne in her amazement.

"I met him who had been rich, and was now in great distress—him whom I loved once," she said, defiantly, as Anne almost shrank away from her at the first suspicion. "He was a penitent man, and a beggar, and I lent part of the money, and then another part, to reinstate him in his past position, and it did not prosper with him."

"That bad man—Heaven help us both—that miserable wretch," gasped forth Anne Judge, indignantly. "He to take my father's money—you, my mother, to give him that money which was meant for me! How dare he, how dare you? Oh, mother, I will go back to Aunt Judge, the only true heart that I know; I can't exist here with you, knowing what you are."

Mrs. Judge gave a scream of horror at Anne's assertion, and held her tightly by the skirts of her dress, as she had done in the hall of Mr. Aynard's house on the day of a revelation that was less bitter than this one.

"Oh, don't leave me. I know that I have been very foolish—very, very wrong, but he was in distress, and ready to marry me and make atonement for all the cruel past."

“Atonement!” cried Anne, indignantly. “Where is he now?”

She hesitated whether to tell all, give up her plotting, her thoughts of Doctor Day and of Hugh Aynard; she was in real trouble, and doubtful what to do. Still the lie came more readily, and saved further explanation.

“He is abroad,” she answered, “he will never come back again. You must not think of leaving me, or of going to that woman who has hated me all her life. You will forgive me spending the money, though I will never forgive myself. I pray that that theft may rise against me at the judgment,” she cried, wildly.

“Hush, hush, mother, be still. There, there, I forgive you—we will say no more of this. I must keep with you, for you are very weak indeed.”

Thus the storm was allayed, though Anne Judge was brought closer on that day to the darker side of the mother’s character than she had ever been before. It was a character which she almost feared now, which in many respects was impenetrable, and which in her heart, and despite her self assurances, she distrusted. She saw the mother’s love in it, purifying it and rendering it bearable; she had known the mother’s weakness in some degree and pitied it, as she prayed few daughters had to pity their mothers, but she had not gauged to the depths, and the darkness around her was confusing.

She had devoted herself to the mother for life, and now the mother was anxious to see her married. Before her she saw the old life of poverty and hard struggling, with less encouragement to persevere, and no example to keep her strong. Life seemed narrowing with her, closing in upon her, just as the mists closed in upon the sides of Aber Glen that bleak November weather, and blotted out half the landscape.

It was still November when Hugh Aynard appeared at Aber. She had seemed in those latter days to have been waiting for him, so little was her surprise at his appearance there. For an instant she was disposed to believe that there was an understanding between Hugh Aynard and her mother, the face of the latter for a moment so brightened at his appearance there. Then she dismissed that thought, and welcomed Aynard faintly to their little cottage, and thought how worn he had become again, as with a new anxiety—perhaps an anxiety about her—in the fortnight that had passed since their last meeting.

“I trust that you will pardon this intrusion,” he said very humbly to Anne Judge. “I have no right to follow you, but I have missed you—and your mother,” he added, quickly. “I propose to stay at the inn a week, and then, in all probability, to return direct to London.”

He lingered only a little while with them on that occasion, spoke of a long walk that he had had that

day across the mountains, and of his wish to reach his hotel early, shook hands with mother and daughter, and withdrew.

Anne looked steadily towards her mother when Aynard had withdrawn.

“ Well ?” she said at last.

“ Well ?” echoed the mother, also interrogatively.

“ You are not sorry that he is here again, even if some faint idea of taking me away from you be in his thoughts ?”

“ Anne,” said the mother, passionately, “ how can I be sorry when the chance is so good a one for you ?”

“ You think that your first surmise is correct ?”

“ Yes,” answered the mother slowly, “ I think so.”

“ I cannot believe it—I will not believe it,” cried Anne, bewildered still, as a bird might flutter its wings and be bewildered in the net of the fowler.

“ He will stay here a week, and then return to London—that is, if you refuse him, Anne, he means,” said Mrs. Judge, eagerly ; “ which you will not do in rash haste.”

“ I cannot accept him.”

“ I have been a hasty woman all my life, and have rueed almost every step that I have taken ; do not follow the example of a woman like me.”

“ Mother, in the first place, I do not believe in Mr. Aynard’s intentions towards me. Ever a kind friend, and courteous gentleman ; but no more in love with me

than I am in love with him. And, in the second place, I have not forgotten Edmund Delancy."

"He has forgotten you."

"How do you know that? Why should you have less faith in him than I have? What has his life been but an honest and true one? Oh, you don't know him —you will never know what a dear follow he is!"

"He is going to marry Lady Burlinson."

"Has he married her—is it true?" cried Anne—"he who has told me that the last woman in the world for him to love was poor Clara."

"He said it in the bitterness of his heart at seeing her another's."

"I will not believe it yet; don't tell me all that you think," implored Anne. "She is a beautiful woman, she shares his mother's home, they see each other every day, and he never comes in search of me. But do not say a word more to destroy my faith in him; he will never marry me—he has been always free to marry whom he pleased—but don't dash me down completely yet!"

She looked a maiden dashed down already then, for she buried her face in her hands, pushed back her dark braids of hair, and cried a little, as over the wreck of her first love lying shattered and torn on the hard rocks beneath her. It was a passing weakness only, and she looked up again, the firm, practical girl that she had ever tried to be, for all the one romance at her heart.

Two days afterwards, Hugh Aynard came into the cottage with a newspaper in his hand. His face was flushed, and he was excited and trembling.

“It has come at last. Here is good news, Miss Judge,” he said, in a hoarse voice, “they are married.”

“Married!” echoed Anne Judge ; and with a calmness that surprised herself, although her heart seemed to become lead and drop with its great weight. “Married at last, then !”

She took the paper from the hands of Aynard, and read in the list of marriages the following :

“On the 4th instant, at St. George’s, Hanover Square, by the Reverend John Musgrave, B.A., Edmund Delancy, only son of the late Edmund Delancy, of Belgrave Square, to Clara, youngest daughter of the late George Seymour, Esq., and widow of the late Sir William Burlinson, Bart., of Gravesford, Hunts.”

“Yes, it is good news,” murmured Anne Judge.

CHAPTER VIII.

AUNT JUDGE HAS A VISITOR.

ON the evening of the day preceding the announcement in the newspapers that had startled sundry worthy folk in North Wales, Aunt Judge was going her rounds for the night at Thirby Cross.

A most exemplary and careful woman was Aunt Judge, practical and methodical, as the reader is aware, and one fitted by habit, if not by nature, for the post of housekeeper and general custodian. Perhaps a trifle too practical and methodical for the housekeeper of a country mansion where thieves never came or were likely to come—a woman with a habit of seeing with her own eyes that every light in the house was extinguished, and that all bars and bolts to doors and window-shutters were in their proper places after nightfall. The servants had been lax in these minor duties in Mrs. Holmes's time; Mrs. Holmes had been a lady who left a great deal to her subordinates, but Aunt Judge left nothing. As the clock struck ten she went her rounds,

a hard-faced, angular woman, whose face was not pleasant for a servant to meet in its sternness of expression when rules had been infringed, lights were burning, or doors were found unfastened—a woman who wanted not only a reason for everything wrong, but a full and sufficient explanation.

All this had been somewhat hard to bear for the first few weeks of the reign of Mary Judge, but the servants had fallen into her ways at last, and had become pliant in her hands. The house at Thirby Cross was too good an establishment, and the places therein too easy for servants to give warning rashly, unless they were servants who liked life which was not to be obtained along with the perquisites. There were a few sensible domestics who even liked Mary Judge after awhile, and when they thought that they understood her; she was not a tyrant, never capricious in her moods as Mrs. Holmes had been; she was only firm and just with everybody, and studied the interests of him who held aloof from his grand home.

Aunt Judge had been at pillow-lace that November evening for amusement's sake, or for the sake of profit, for what we know to the contrary. She was a stanch believer in "rainy days," and might be even yet preparing for one, though she worked less hard now that all was peace and rest around her. She had done her fair share of work, however, that evening, and was going her rounds for the night after her usual manner.

Suddenly she came to a full stop in the hall, as well she might, considering the novelty of incident that was presented to her by a heavy knocking at the front door—a knocking which surprised her, but did not disturb her nerves in any way. She seemed a woman prepared for emergencies, and one not likely to be dismayed by events out of the common order of every-day routine. When the servants were looking over the balusters or peering from their various rooms, Aunt Judge walked in a stately manner to the door beneath the porch and called forth :

“Who is there?”

“It is I, aunt,” responded a cheery manly voice without, which she recognized at once.

She let the great chain fall, drew back the bolts, unlocked the door, and opened it.

“Not the most convenient hour to choose for a visit, Mr. Delancy,” she said ; “but business of importance has brought you here, I have no doubt. Is it raining?” she continued, peering out into the night beyond the porch.

“Cats and dogs,” he answered, “and that’s a rain I rather enjoy—for there is something lively about it.”

“Your business is not of a serious nature, at any rate.”

“Oh yes, it is, aunt,” he replied coolly, “of a serious nature to me. I want the address of your niece. I told you that I should come for it—here I am.”

“And for no other reason, you disturb the quiet of the place at this hour?”

“I am pressed for time. I am behind time in my journey altogether, owing to the illness of a dear mother whom I could not leave, and who is now well and strong again, thank Heaven! I hope that you are glad to see me, aunt?”

“I wish that you would not keep calling me ‘aunt,’ ” replied Mary Judge pettishly—“it is a liberty; you have no right to address me in that manner.”

“Not just at present,” said Delancy; “I am fore-stalling matters, that’s all, and this is a rehearsal to which you need not object. Of course you will be my aunt, or I am greatly mistaken in Anne Judge.”

“Time enough to call me ‘aunt’ when Anne Judge is your wife, then,” said the housekeeper. “You stay here to-night?”

“With your permission—and in my old room.”

“I do not know which is your old room, Mr. Delancy.”

“The one next to the staircase which leads into the servants’ hall; that’s a favourite little place of mine. Anne’s old room, where the dear girl helped to bring me back to life when I thought that I was dying.”

“Very well. Will you step into the drawing-room, whilst I go up-stairs and give orders to the servants?”

“I have put you out a great deal by coming so late, I fear.”

“Yes, you have,” Aunt Judge replied.

“Never mind, aunt—I beg pardon, Miss Mary: no, that don’t sound quite the thing either—Miss Judge, it shall not occur again. Where have you been sitting this evening?”

“In my housekeeper’s room.”

“That is the room which will suit me exactly. I never liked the great drawing-room, and I have called to see the housekeeper, ask her advice, and bring her round by degrees into the best of tempers.”

“I am a cross woman when put out of my way,” said Aunt Judge, as her features relaxed somewhat, “and perhaps I am not in the best of tempers yet awhile, and have not given you a fair welcome. I will return in a few moments.”

“Thank you. I hope that you have not let the fire out.”

“I rake that out at a quarter to ten invariably, but it shall be lighted again when I come back.”

It was already lighted when she returned. Sarah Griffin, the servant, entering with the supper-tray, paused open-mouthed and tray in hand at the vision of Edmund Delancy kneeling at the fire-grate, lighting up and arranging the coals for himself, and thereby saving everybody unnecessary trouble.

“Well, Sarah, how are you getting on?” he asked.

“Very well, thank you, Mr. Delancy,” said the servant. “My gracious, sir, will you let me do that, please?”

“Oh, I’m used to this ; I’m going into housekeeping, Sarah, presently, and it’s very necessary to keep one’s hand in. What have you got there?”

“Supper, sir.”

“Bless the girl, I have had my supper hours ago. How long will Miss Judge be, Sarah?”

“I—I don’t know, sir.”

“I am not quite certain that I shall stay here to-night, now,” he said ; “a walk to Wolchester will save time in the morning.”

“You are in great haste, then,” said Aunt Judge, coming into the room.

“Yes, I must not lose any more time,” answered Delancy, “or the dear girl will think that I have forgotten her. Not that she should think that, remembering her wish and my promise ; but when one is alone in a country place, and shut out from all society but one’s own thoughts, those thoughts become morbid and confusing. I dare say that you have remarked this yourself.”

“When I was younger and more foolish,” answered Aunt Judge, as she took a seat by the fire which Delancy had lighted—“when I did not know my own mind. What are you staring at, Sarah ? why don’t you go to bed?”

“There—there is nothing else wanted, ma’am?”

“I will get it myself if there is.”

“Shall I take away the supper-things? Mr. Delancy has supped, he says.”

“No.”

Sarah Griffin, silenced by Miss Judge’s decisive tone, and even a little surprised at it, for all her experience of the housekeeper’s character, withdrew and closed the door. The housekeeper crossed her thin hands in her lap and looked down at the carpet, then suddenly looked up, and fixed Delancy with her cold grey eyes.

“Yes, you have put me out very much,” she said; “I don’t like to be surprised in this manner.”

“I told you that I should come again. You might have expected me before this.”

“I do not put faith in people’s promises,” was the short answer.

“Well, there is nothing to be very much disturbed about, aunt.”

“Yes, there is. And don’t say ‘aunt.’”

“I beg pardon—Miss Judge.”

“There is a great deal to be disturbed about, for I don’t know what to say to you.”

“Anne is in trouble, then—she is unhappy. Ah, I was sure she would be!”

“I have not said so,” said Aunt Judge.

“But she has.”

“She has not said anything. She is not the girl to make a parade of her perplexities.”

“Where is she to be found?”

This was a leading question which Aunt Judge was prepared for, and which she felt compelled to resist.

“I have no right to tell you.”

“You refuse me her address then, Miss Judge?” said Delancy. “Upon my honour, that is hard on me.”

“I know it is.” And then Mary Judge compressed her lips and looked down again.

“Why do you refuse me this information?” asked Delancy, very serious now: “because Anne is happy without me—has learned to forget me, and to be satisfied with life by her mother’s side? Granted all this if you wish it, Miss Judge, but still give me the opportunity to form my own opinion on the matter—to see her, and assure her that I have still the patience to wait.”

“Mr. Delancy,” said Aunt Judge quickly, “I do not believe that Anne is happy; I feel that she is in trouble—I see it in her letters, and despite all her protestations—and that troubles me.”

“You promised me that I should know this,” said Delancy reproachfully.

“Yes, I did,” replied Aunt Judge, “and I have been annoyed with myself at a promise which I had no right to make, considering that I had pledged my word also to keep her secret. I see now the harm that you can

do—not one iota of good that it is possible to effect."

"What harm, Miss Judge?"

"She is trying to settle down still; she is as firm as ever in her intention to live for her mother, and you will only disturb her very much and add to her troubles. I see that very plainly—and I cannot tell you where Anne is."

"I hope that you have not quite made up your mind," said Delancy, gravely. "I have surprised you as you confessed, and you will think of this again."

"I have been thinking of it for six months," said Aunt Judge, "seeing that you would deserve her if you came here—still constant to one who was scarcely a woman when you spoke of love to her. It seems reality now, not romance, and I feel for you, sympathize with you, and—cannot help you."

"Anne Judge is unhappy, madam," said Delancy sternly. That was his line of argument, from which he would not deviate—Anne Judge unhappy, and he away from her!

"You would add to her unhappiness."

"I should not add to it."

"I assure you that you would."

"Has she said that?" asked Delancy.

"She has implied it. Her mother is a woman who loves her very much, and Anne has pledged herself to watch over her, to forget that past which the world

is not likely to forgive. The mother cannot face society ; she is alone, wholly repentant, and has only Anne to gladden her remaining years ; a weak, fretful, jealous woman I feel assured—jealous even of my letters to Anne, and of Anne's letters to me—but still her mother."

"I will see that mother and reason with her."

"She never listened to reason in her life."

"I will see Anne and assure her that I am patient and true. I have more than one suggestion to make by which all the minor difficulties in the way of our happiness can be overcome."

"Every suggestion will be another trial to her."

"I am the best judge of that," answered Delancy, "for your niece is not a mystery, and she understands me. I do not break my word so lightly as you have broken yours to me."

Aunt Judge drew herself up very erect at this ; cold and phlegmatic as she was, there were moments, as we know, when the fire could leap forth. She checked herself, however, and said :

"Right, I have broken my word to you. I keep mine to Anne Judge."

"She told you to conceal her address from me?"

"In her first letter—yes."

"And since that time?"

"She has not mentioned your name."

"Ah, you think she has forgotten me?"

“Or is trying, perhaps.”

Delancy sat with his hands clasped, thinking of the new position that was presented to him. He had been hopeful of the result of the visit to Thirby Cross, not knowing correctly the nature of Aunt Judge. He knew that she loved her niece very much, that Anne was first in that solitary woman’s heart, and he believed that she would help him to her if assured of his constancy.

“May I ask what you want me to do?” he said at last.

“To give her another year—six months, then,” she added, as Delancy shook his head very decisively, “to give her time to understand her mother and herself.”

“I have been more than twelve months away from her.”

“She is unsettled still, though she writes of her contentment. Give her more time.”

“To forget me—to fall in love with somebody else, thinking what a flashy, talkative fellow I was—all words and no stability? No, that will not do.”

Aunt Judge reflected again. She was interested in Delancy; she admired his firmness, for she was a firm woman herself; she hoped one day to see him her niece’s husband, and she would have helped him at once to the discovery of that niece if she could have seen in that hour anything but fresh distress to Anne. For Delancy’s sake, even, she was resolved not to tell him:

he would confront Anne and the mother, there would be entreaties, possibly reproaches, a mother's interdict on any engagement, and a disappearance, perhaps, of mother and daughter from them all. There could ensue nothing but disappointment and mortification, and she thought that she was acting for the best. Hence Aunt Judge was as firm, or as obstinate, as Edmund Delancy.

He read that that decision was not likely to be altered by any persuasion of his own, and he said at last :

“ You concede nothing, then, Miss Judge ? ”

“ I cannot give you her address, but——”

“ But what ? ” he asked eagerly.

“ But if you will pledge me your word not to attempt to find her, you may write to her, and I will send your letter in one of my own. Ask her in that letter if any good can arise from your visit to her ; seek from her that permission which I feel now that I have no right to give, and which I am sure, Mr. Delancy, that she will refuse you.”

“ Of course she will, and then I start in flat disobedience to her orders and her mother's, and now I do not,” he said. “ There,” he cried, with his light vein asserting itself again, “ I'll act for myself, and take no woman's advice. I know what is best, I see what is best, and I am going in search of it, aunt. And I certainly shall call you 'aunt' whenever I like, and it's no good your firing off your indignation at me ! ”

I intend to find Anne Judge in spite of all the opposition in the world."

"How is it possible?"

"Ah! you do not know what a pig-headed fellow I am—what a detective kind of ability I possess."

"You have not found Mr. Aynard?"

"No," said Delancy, somewhat crestfallen, "and I have made one search for him too; but I know that he is safe, and that in good time he will come back to me. I shall find him also, and enlist him in my service, for I am on a double quest. He corresponds with his bankers—he corresponds with you."

"No. His steward transacts the business of this estate, and pays the servants. It is one of his old wandering fits, at which no one here is surprised."

"Whilst there is money for stewards to draw, and for servants to receive, no one will be anxious about Hugh Aynard. But I have troubled you enough concerning Aynard in my letters; we are thinking, talking of Anne Judge now. And," starting to his feet, "we are not acting for her, and in a long search every hour is of importance."

"You are going to your room?"

"No I am going to Wolchester."

"To-night?"

"To be sure," he said, buttoning up his coat to the chin; "I cannot stop here. To-morrow morning by the first train I start for Suffolk, from Suffolk to

Norfolk, and so round the coast, and to every country village in my way. They are in the country, I am sure, for neither mother nor daughter would have her health in London, and they will not be far from the sea, for sea air agrees with Anne Judge."

Aunt Judge felt that he was looking intently into her face, which, however, was one not likely to betray her.

"It is a wild, foolish search," she said, "beginning in a wild and foolish manner."

"I am of a different opinion."

"You will stay here till the morning?"

"No, thank you; I am off at once, full of fire and energy, ready to waste a year in search of her, and confident that I must discover her in good time. I do not mind the trouble, for it will repay me. There is adventure in it—a great deal of novelty in a fellow hunting for his sweetheart everywhere, and prepared—indeed, rather anxious for—a few difficulties in the way. I shall find her, and soon. Good-bye, aunt; I cannot expect you to wish me good luck, and so I'll wish it for myself."

"Good-bye, young man," said Aunt Judge, in a half-sorrowful and half-gentle voice that was new to listen to. "I wish that you were not so obstinate."

"Ah, that is what I wish in your case, too. You are a terribly obstinate woman, and what a pity it is! Do you mind helping me on with my waterproof,

aunt?" he asked, when they were in the hall again.
"Thank you. And now, good-bye once more."

When the door was opened, and he was standing under the porch, he looked at her again, and said :

"You do not repent?"

"No."

"I know that you think you are acting for the best ; but it is a very great mistake. I shall give your love to Anne and Mrs. Judge."

He went away at a sharp pace from the house, and Aunt Judge watched him till he was lost in the darkness without.

"I don't think that it rains now," she murmured, "so he will not get wet going to Wolchester. I wonder if he will find them? I wonder when I shall see that honest face again?"

CHAPTER IX.

IN SEARCH.

EDMUND DELANCY reached Wolchester in the dark and early morning, and alarmed the town in general, and the inhabitants of the Dragon in particular, by an incessant rattling at the hotel door till the Boots was aroused, and he was admitted.

He was taken for a “regular,” or one of the visitors locked out by mistake; but he maintained his ground when once on the hall mat, and referred the Boots to his particular friend, Mr. James Ridkins, of that town, if he wanted a reference at that unseemly hour. His friend Ridkins would be very happy to give him the best of references, he was assured, and was always delighted when he was aroused suddenly to do a good action for a fellow-creature. The name of Ridkins had its effect; the landlord shouted a few directions through the keyhole to the Boots, and Edmund Delancy in due course settled down till morning.

He was at the railway station at an early hour, and found that there was no train to Suffolk till twelve minutes past ten.

There were three hours to wait before he left for the county in which he thought it natural that the Judges would locate themselves, and he spent that time in wandering about the streets, and thinking of the day when he drove Anne into the town to see her father.

He passed Mr. James Ridkins' establishment, and went on to Primrose Street. A sudden idea seized him that Abel Smith might have heard from Anne Judge, and would be more communicative than the new housekeeper at Thirby Cross ; it was a faint hope, and he went in search of it down that narrow, stifling entry where he had once encountered poor Judge with his mask off.

But Abel Smith was gone ; the dyer's shop was in the occupation of a shoemaker, who made no shoes, but patched and cobbled a few old boots at times, and was a sorrowful young man who smelt of rum.

He gave our hero all the information that he required concerning Abel Smith.

“He lost his dorg, sir ; a brewer's dray in the street ran over it, and the loss turned the old chap quite. He wasn't the same man, sir, and he was tooked ill, and had no one to nuss him, so he went into the workus and died there just three weeks ago. He went off werry comfor'ble, sir, at last.”

"Poor old fellow! I am glad to hear that."

"I have got his shop, but my bisness don't do in it, and all the jobs ain't paid for that I gets, 'specially at this time of year. If, at any time, sir, there's anything in my way——"

"I'll let you know," concluded Delancy for him. "Meanwhile, get yourself some rum."

The man thanked Delancy, and looked after him with a surprised air as he went down the court soliloquizing as follows :

"So a man finds change in everything around him, and yet I am expected to wait, believing that no change will come to those I love the best, and that they will believe the same of me, though I skulk for ever in the background like a bravo. So forward, Edmund, my friend, hoping for the best, and sure of one thing—that you are not forgotten."

At ten o'clock he was in the train and buying a copy of one of the newspapers which had just arrived from London, and was being retailed by enterprising newsboys. He glanced very hastily through it when the train had started, for he was anxious to survey the country through which he passed, lest a possible retreat for Anne Judge and her mother should escape him. Anything very pretty, very picturesque, might have attracted the attention of the wanderers, and he must notice everything, and make—thanks to Aunt Judge's obstinacy, which he deplored as the worst trait in her

character—wild guesses at everything until the truth was reached.

There was no news in the body of the paper of any importance to him, and he tossed it aside and glanced at the advertisements ; at the advertisements concerning new music chiefly, where he met with his own name once or twice—a name that was at least safe for some hundreds of copies now, and which music publishers were glad to have upon their title-pages. He had made fair progress in the last twelve months—he had been even the hero of one success—and then the restless fever by which he was beset had taken him away from his chances once more.

“ It might not be a bad idea to advertise in the mysterious second column,” he said, running his eye down it : “ Anne Judge, Spinster, is entreated to send her address to her disconsolate ‘ Neddy,’ for instance ; but then Anne is in a place where newspapers are obtained with difficulty, I feel sure.”

He did not look at the first column—no one was likely to be born or to be married in whom he was interested, and the first column he had skipped all his life. It was his mother who had first shown him the advertisement of Clara Day’s marriage with Sir William Burlinson, and told him not to feel surprised at so natural an event, and that was the last time in which a newspaper advertisement had struck home. He tossed the supplement after the news, and thus was

spared the shock of the announcement of his own marriage, which would doubtless have more astonished him than the notice of some five years since.

He was in Suffolk a few hours afterwards, and had begun his search with diligence. He was new to the adventure yet awhile, and so minute in his inquiries that the same care bestowed upon every quiet village which bordered on the sea would extend his search beyond man's allotted time to search for heaven.

He was persevering and energetic ; he was almost certain that in Suffolk or Norfolk he should find them, for all the grim, impenetrable visage of Aunt Judge. He was in Norfolk at the end of the fortnight, not daunted yet, but rather encouraged by the difficulties which beset him, and feeling still that they were not insurmountable. He had written to his mother some days since, telling her that he was well, and marching onwards to the rescue of Anne Judge ; and requesting that all letters might be forwarded to him at a certain hotel, where he should arrive on a certain day early in December.

He arrived a day or two behind his time—having gone out of his way to an inland village that he thought resembled Thirby Cross, and might have been chosen for association's sake—and there he found at his hotel a letter from his mother, and two newspapers also directed to him in the same well-known handwriting.

“ Whatever is the good soul sending me news-

papers for?" he said; then he opened his mother's letter, and found a ready answer to the question which he had put to himself.

It was a hurried epistle, written by a hand that had trembled with indignation at the trick which had been played on "her boy." It contained another letter, which he set aside for a time, in order to master the story which his mother detailed to him—the story of his marriage to Clara Burlinson, formally announced in the newspaper which he had bought at Wolchester station a fortnight since and read so carelessly.

"What can be the meaning of this, dear Ned? (his mother wrote). Is it a sorry jest, or is there a malicious intention at the bottom of it? I have made every inquiry at the office at which the paper is published, and can only ascertain that the advertisement was offered in the usual way, endorsed with the name of Edmund Delancy, paid for, and received without any questioning whatever. Why are not newspapers more careful? I have put a second advertisement in the paper, announcing that the former was a fabrication, of course. They are both posted to you. Clara is perplexed. I enclose a letter from Mr. Aynard; if it contains his congratulations, it will at least have the effect of telling us where he is, perhaps of bringing him back to us; so out of evil intentions cometh good, my dear boy. We can only put up with this, and leave the rascal who thought of the

scheme—I am sure that he is a rascal—to exult in his poor success."

Then followed the news from town, and Delancy postponed that until he had examined the newspapers, his brow contracting very much as he read the one of earlier date. He perused Hugh Aynard's letter last, dated from Aber, North Wales. Aynard had seen the advertisement in the newspaper, and had hastened at once to offer his congratulations to his friend. Aynard was glad that it was all settled at last, and that the lovers long divided were together for good—for ever. He was not distressed, he felt happy at the result; they would find that he should have the courage to face them when the honeymoon was over and they were at home again; the happiness to prove to them that he was well, and better than he had ever been. For the first time in his life he had not been mistaken as to the right course to adopt; all was as it should be—as it should have been long ago, if he had not stepped between Clara and Delancy, and marred everything with his folly. Delancy put away the letter, and then took up the newspapers again for reconsideration.

"This is not done to annoy me," he muttered; "and Clara Burlinson never made an enemy in her life. It is to deceive some one interested in Lady Burlinson or me; to lead some one to suppose that I am married, or that Clara is—to deceive perhaps,

Hugh Aynard or Anne Judge. Hugh Aynard writes in high spirits, but Anne has no congratulations to offer. Anne Judge is intended to be the dupe of this little pleasantry, then—she who is the last woman to be duped into believing it. I hope that her mother is not at the bottom of this—that this is not a little plan to reconcile Anne to the gloomy life that she has chosen; I should prefer to think better of Mrs. Judge than that."

He packed his knapsack, and hurried away to the nearest railway station, where he took the next train back to Wolchester. He was at Thirby Cross before the night was over; once again, and even at a later hour, he aroused the echoes of the gloomy mansion with his summons for admittance.

Aunt Judge opened the door herself, after an inquiry on the inner side of the stout oaken partition that divided them, and Edmund Delancy entered the house.

"I could not believe that it was you again," said Mary Judge; "it was not like your knock. I was prepared for thieves."

Mary Judge laid a pistol on the table in the hall; Edmund Delancy took no heed of this precaution on her part, although she added:

"We are all women in this house, and there is property of value here that a desperate man or two might think worth coming after. I do not believe

in the universal honesty of people in these parts. I hope that you have not come here with the old appeal?"

"No, with a new one."

"Will you step into——"

"I will remain here: I am going away directly," he said, "no matter what your answer is to me. Read that."

Aunt Judge's eyes were beginning to fail her, although she had not yet taken to glasses; she returned the newspaper which he had offered her, and said:

"My sight is weak. Read it for me."

He read the announcement of his own marriage with Clara Burlinson, and Aunt Judge betrayed more excitement than he had expected from so cold a woman, for the hand that held the lantern shook strangely as he concluded.

"Is it possible that he, too, is false, and mean, and lying?" she said.

"Of whom are you speaking?"

"Of my master."

"No, no, Aunt Judge, not Hugh Aynard."

"It is a mad trick—the shallow cunning of a weak mind. I don't know what to think."

"This is intended to deceive Anne Judge."

"Yes, I see that."

"You see that," he cried, "the same idea suggests

itself to you? Then, give me the clue to find your niece; if she see this, what will she think of me?"

"I received a letter from Mr. Aynard to-day—he is coming to Thirby Cross next week on business of importance."

"Never mind Mr. Aynard just now. Have you heard from Anne?"

"Not a word. It is that which surprises me—which makes me fear with you. Mr. Delancy," she said, with increasing excitement, "that girl must not be deceived by the people about her—be led to think that you are married, and then dragged into a match with some one else—"

"Oh, I do not fear that," cried Delancy; "Anne is not the girl to act hastily, or to forget me readily. But she will be sorry, I think—I know; and you must aid me to undeceive her—to discover the reason for this plotting."

"It is only fair," said Aunt Judge thoughtfully, "for it is plotting against you and her, and it may be necessary to act. Go to her, Mr. Delancy, and Heaven speed you! I am sorry that I was hard to move two weeks ago; but I could not see beyond the present hour, or guess that *that* was coming."

"You have not heard from Anne?" said Delancy doubtfully.

"Not a word," she answered again.

"Well, then, her address?"

“Aber, North Wales.”

“That is your master’s address,” he said, “not Anne’s.”

“They are both at Aber now.”

“Strange coincidence,” said Delancy, “strange and unfortunate meeting, for he believes in that lying paragraph in the paper. However, all is well that ends well, and there are only twenty-four hours more of doubt for her and me.”

“Is it necessary to telegraph the fact?” said Aunt Judge; “it’s an expense, perhaps, but——”

“But it spoils my surprise and hers,” he said, “and there is no danger to fear. No, leave the revelation to me; I want to hear Anne Judge, Spinster, say that she is very glad that I have not married Lady Burlinson. She has advised me more than once to marry her, and now she thinks that I have taken her at her word, and treated her, poor girl, with a silence most contemptible. Unless she has seen the contradiction in the newspaper—which her friends have not shown her, if they are in the plot out there—and then——”

“And then!” repeated Mary Judge.

“Then,” he said, laughing, “I shall have obtained your niece’s address under false pretences.”

“You are a man easily pleased,” was the answer; “but the mystery is not solved yet.”

“Confound the mystery! I am going to see Anne Judge, aunt.”

He went away at once, with Mary Judge looking sorrowfully after him—a woman who guessed at the truth more completely than the lover did, and thought that she read the solution to the riddle in Mr. Aynard's letter to her. "It will all end well, I hope," she murmured, "for that man is no hot-headed fool, and will do nothing rashly."

She was not quite certain that it would all end well the following day, when by the early morning's post a letter reached her from the Welsh village to which Edmund Delancy was then hastening. It was a long letter from her niece, which we need not give in detail here; it expressed one fact, that the aunt was scarcely prepared for yet awhile, and it dismayed her.

Anne Judge was engaged to be married to Hugh Aynard of Thirby Cross.

CHAPTER X.

AT ABER.

IT was not till after dark that Edmund Delancy stepped from the small wooden station at Aber into the high road, and paused to consider which was the direct way to Anne Judge. He was the one arrival at the village that December evening, and the desolateness of the place was not exhilarating ; albeit his spirits were high, now that he was near his journey's end.

“ I do not think that I should have ever come here,” he said to himself, “ or dreamed that she would have flown so far as this. And yet I was right in my prophecy—a quiet country spot, and near the sea, for that hoarse murmur beyond there is the sea, I know. After more than fourteen months’ seclusion, she must be glad to see me ; and the mother will be on my side, when she has listened to all my arrangements for everybody’s happiness. How those mountains beyond must have seemed to have shut me out from her ! and yet here I am—and I wonder which is the way.”

He wished that he had inquired of the solitary railway porter who took his ticket, and had some trouble in the wind, and with a very bad lantern, to make out if it was the right one ; and then, feeling that he could not miss his road in so small a place, he walked towards the cluster of houses nestling, as it were, in the shadow of the hills.

The village was dark and quiet enough ; the inhabitants were early folk, who went to bed betimes, and were not disposed to waste fire and candles in the long winter nights that had come upon them. There was a gleam of light in the windows of the inn beyond ; and behind the curtains of a cottage that was backing, as it were, shily from its neighbours towards the green hills, a light shone, betokening people who were wakeful still.

“ Now if that should be Mrs. Judge’s retreat from the world,” he said, pausing to gaze towards the cottage, “ it has not been badly chosen, if peace and rest be the desiderata. A fair place for an anchorite, or for a woman weary of the world ; but not for Anne Judge, however much of a spinster she may be. I am inclined to believe in the force of the instinct that impels me towards that house, where, I trust, I shall see her once again.”

A few quick steps took him close upon it ; if he were right he should have saved himself a walk to the inn, and if wrong he could apologize for the intrusion, and make inquiries concerning a grave-faced woman and a

pretty daughter who had settled in the village. The door opened as he advanced, and two figures lingered at the threshold—that of a tall man and a slight woman. The man was about to depart, and the woman was bidding him good-night, it was evident. Delancy thought that he would not interfere with a lover's parting, and turned back upon his road, feeling assured now that that was not the house wherein Anne Judge lived. And yet the figures seemed familiar to him, and they might not be lovers after all. Why not Hugh Aynard and Anne Judge? He stopped and looked back—they were in earnest conversation still; the man was bending down his face to hers, and she was turning away from him, even evading the kiss which he was soliciting.

“No, not Anne Judge,” said Delancy, “but a pretty picture, if there was more light upon it. How happy they look, and how love goes on and grows apace, even in an out-of-the-way corner of the world like this! Well, thank Heaven, my time is coming too, I think.”

He walked away towards the inn at a brisk pace now: he was wasting time there; he should not like any one to be watching him and Anne, however legitimate the interest that might be taken in the love affairs of other people. But the man who had lingered at the door followed him along the high road at a pace more rapid, and overtook him before the inn was reached.

He passed him even, singing softly to himself in the

lightness of his heart, or in the fulness of his love—like a happy fellow as he was, thought Delancy, as he glanced towards him.

One glance was assuring and convincing.

“Hugh,” cried Delancy, “Hugh Aynard, stand and deliver yourself up to the outraged hands of friendship—neglected. My prisoner, old fellow, at last.”

He took his hands in both his own and shook them warmly, Aynard returning his grip with equal heartiness.

“My dear Ned, how pleased I am—how glad I am after all these long months of hiding from you like a coward !”

“But a coward no longer.”

“No, I am strong now. You will be glad to hear, Ned, of the good fortune which has come to me, which is to change the whole tenor of my life, I hope. But—your wife—where is she ?”

“I will tell you about my wife presently.”

“How strange that you should think of spending your honeymoon in North Wales, and at this time of year. I fancied that Clara and you were in Paris.”

“That was a strange fancy, then. Where are you staying ?”

“At the inn.”

“We will go there at once, and you shall tell me all concerning that young lady, to whose tender farewell I have been a witness this evening.”

"Anne Judge? oh yes, I will tell you all concerning her, Ned; how I met her at Llandudno, came on to Aber after her—What are you stopping for?"

"Anne Judge! that was Anne Judge, then?" asked Delancy eagerly, as he came to a halt in the roadway.

"Yes—the girl who is to be my wife, Ned, to make me a happy fellow, after all the inconsistencies and follies of my life."

"Anne Judge is to be your wife?" asked Delancy slowly.

"Yes."

"She is engaged to be your wife? This is not one of your delusions?"

"No, this is reality," cried Aynard, "and I am on the right road to felicity at last. Come into the inn and I will tell you the story."

"No, the place would kill me with its heat. I am choking already," cried Delancy. "Cannot we get down to the sea—where there is darkness and quietness, and no one to interrupt us?"

"Where you please; but it is cold near the water."

"What does that matter to a man who is burning with fever?"

"You are not well, Ned," said Aynard, with an earnest look into his face.

"No, I am very ill—very heart-sick; I will tell you presently how it has occurred. Let us get down to the cool sea-beach, and out of this wretched village."

Aynard led the way across a marshy piece of grass, cut up by a watercourse which came flowing from the Glen towards the sea, and was swollen by the winter's rains. When the rough beach was reached, Delancy flung himself full length upon the stones, and groaned.

"My dear Ned, something very serious has happened, I am sure, and your story should precede mine, for it is of greater importance. Clara——"

"Clara is nothing to do with it," said Delancy, sitting up, and by a great effort regaining his composure. "I am over-tired with travelling. I have rested neither night nor day in order to reach here."

"It was kind," said Aynard.

"I did not say that it was to find you," was the fierce answer.

"Ned, what does this mean?"

"There, there—don't mind me, I am talking foolishly," said Delancy. "You have known what it is to have these strange fits, and you can understand my feelings."

"But you are not unhappy—how is it possible for you to be unhappy?"

"Ah, how is that possible indeed! My dear fellow, I am happy enough. Don't you see that this is the extravagance of joy—of joy at finding you again. Go on."

Aynard hesitated still—he did not see that; he was unable to detect a reason for the eccentric behaviour of

his friend, and it was not till Delancy said "Go on" again, that he began the relation of those incidents which led up to his engagement with Anne Judge. He grew interested in his story as Delancy listened with attention to him ; he almost forgot the past demeanour of his friend, and became excited himself with the recapitulation of his own success.

The wind howled round them, and they could hear it moaning in the Glen like a child that had lost its way, and the great dark waves dashed at each other in the distance, and broke into spray with a sullen roar that echoed along the beach, like the tragic chorus to Delancy's thoughts. It was a strange confession of a strange man, and Delancy listened patiently—if listening with a fire at one's brain and an angry beating of one's heart can be reconciled with patience. He did not break in upon the relation ; his old habit of interrupting those who addressed him did not leap forth on this occasion ; he was stern, silent, and attentive.

Aynard spoke of his meeting with the Judges at Llandudno ; of his own bitter solitude away from those to whom his heart yearned ; of the misery of his position till these people from the past crossed him once again. He spoke of Anne Judge, of their frequent meetings, of his interest in her, of the mother's fear lest he should pay Anne those attentions which might be nothing in his opinion but everything in hers, and so terminate in misconstruction and disappointment.

"I had begun to think then, Ned, what a dear, amiable, warm-hearted girl she was; to feel that it was possible to love her—not with the mad passion that I had had for Clara Burlinson, but with a pure, calm affection, that should increase with every day; and I saw—ay, it was not fancy, as the result has proved," he cried exultingly—"that she was embarrassed when she met me, timid, and yet kind. I felt that here might be some one who would rescue me from utter loneliness, who knew me, understood me, and who would in good time love me. When she left Llandudno I followed her to Aber. I had made up my mind to propose to her then; I was not unwelcome to Anne, there was hope for me, and we are pledged now to become man and wife."

"When?" was the laconic question, as Aynard concluded.

"It is to be a long engagement; she wishes time to consider if it is possible to return my affection."

"The natural shyness of the sex, that will not acknowledge everything at once, even to a favoured lover," said Delancy.

"I hope it is that," answered Aynard. "But, Ned, you don't congratulate me on my conquest, you who know how truly amiable and kind a girl she is."

"She is very young," said Delancy gravely.

"Nineteen next September."

"Yes, on the second. But women are very fickle."

"Ah, that is not fair," said Aynard enthusiastically. "You have no right to assert as much, knowing how true Clara has been to you. Your experience of women has been a good and honourable experience, after all; and there is nothing now to embitter your recollection of them. This is one of your old jests, Ned."

"Yes. My old jesting mood is coming uppermost again," he said. "What a funny fellow I have been through life to be sure—a fellow of infinite mirth, taking the ills of life with composure, and catching, even in the blackest part of the tragedy, the flutter of Thalia's skirts. Has Anne Judge ever spoken of me, Hugh?"

"I think the subject of Ned Delancy was my first introduction to her good graces. How cold it is here."

"I don't notice it. Thank you for singing my praises to the maiden of your choice," said Delancy, "though you might have left me to sound my own trumpet. Did she ever tell you that I was coming one day to perform that little office?"

"No."

"Ha, ha!—a quiet girl—I like Anne Judge," cried Delancy. "Did she ever tell you that one day, when I was in one of my frolicsome moods—you know my way, Aynard—I made love to her myself?"

"No, she never told me that," said Aynard, surprised at this second question. "When was that?"

"Oh, she never told you of our little love affair?"

"Not a word."

"It was all a jest—she saw that very readily—and probably has long since forgotten it," said Delancy. "It is not worth mentioning again. I was at Thirby Cross at the time—perhaps you had something to do with it, for you started the idea one day. And so she never told you of it?"

"No," answered Aynard gloomily.

"Now answer me this question," said Delancy very sternly. "Did you put the advertisement of my marriage in the papers?"

"I, Ned!" exclaimed Aynard. "How was I to know of your marriage?"

"You did not, then?"

"I did not."

"You saw the announcement?"

"Yes."

"Who showed it to you first?"

"I read it myself. I have been watching day after day for it, wondering when it would come, and hoping for both your sakes that nothing had occurred to stop the wedding. My dear Ned, I am so glad——"

"Yes—keep quiet, please, your congratulations will come presently," said Delancy. "You have not received mine yet, and I have another question to ask. Did you see a second notice of that marriage two days afterwards, followed by a significant explanation of its appearance there?"

“No. I have not seen a paper since. The London newspapers are not to be procured in this village—it is a question of sending for them to Bangor, when they are required. What was in the second notice? What does it mean?”

“It means, Hugh Aynard, that the announcement of my marriage with Clara Burlinson was a lie!”

“Ned not married then?”

“Not married—not thinking of marriage—never likely to marry, Hugh,” he answered, more sorrowfully than angrily now.

“Oh, you have quarrelled with Clara again—you—”

“But I congratulate you on your engagement to Anne Judge,” said Delancy, rising, a movement that was imitated by his friend. “She will make a good wife, I think,” he added hesitatingly.

“Yes.”

“If you and she quarrel in your turn—if this long engagement ends in nothing—what then?”

“It will be my last disappointment. I shall feel that I am doomed to be ever unlucky, ever unhappy, and that I had better go out of the world at once. But I can’t think of this—this is folly. Tell me of this notice in the paper—who did it—what was it done for?”

“I think that I see,” said Delancy, “and I may tell you presently. Let us get back to the inn. You are

right, the wind is bleak here, and comes at us like the Fate against which you were wont to rave once. What time do the Judges go to bed?"

"They are not early folk, though I leave them at an early hour. Why do you ask?"

"I wish to call with my congratulations, that is all," he said, as they walked away from the sea. "I cannot leave Aber very well without offering them."

"Of course not. But you are not thinking of leaving Aber after this long journey in search of me?"

"I wished to make quite sure that you were well," said Delancy slowly; "finding that you are not only well but happy, what have I to stay for?"

"Clara is with your mother still?"

"Yes."

"Ah, you are anxious to return to her, Ned. I am sure that you have quarrelled, but I am sure that you will——"

Delancy stamped his foot passionately upon the ground, and begged him to desist.

"You should know me better. When I feel that a woman has lost her faith in me, no matter under what circumstances—that she has readily forgotten me, and found another lover wherewith to console herself in my absence I give her up for ever. There is no stepping back to my past love, for she has fallen beneath my standard of perfectibility, and I have only pity for her—I might almost say contempt—for ever afterwards."

They were silent till they had reached the inn, where Delancy found that there was accommodation for him for the night. "Is my room ready? I am tired," he said.

"It will be ready in a few minutes, sir."

He waited for the few minutes to pass with more impatience than he had listened to Hugh Aynard's story, drumming his fingers on the table at which he sat, and shaking his head at Aynard's suggestions of various refreshments before he retired to his room.

"I hope that you are not offended with me, for keeping this a secret from you," Aynard said, with a wistful look at the stern, set features of his friend; "I have been waiting for your return from the honeymoon which I thought that you were enjoying."

"I am not offended, Hugh," said Delancy. "I am glad to think that you are going to be married, and to settle down at last in the old house that has been too long deserted. With all my heart, I wish you every happiness."

"Thank you, thank you. Only I have not been able to make you out this evening, and your manner has been a mystery to me."

"Forget it. Good-night."

"Good-night," replied Aynard, shaking hands with him.

Delancy went out of the room, closed it behind him, and sought out the host.

“ Landlord,” he said, “ I have business in Aber, and you need not mention to Mr. Aynard that I have gone out again.”

“ No, sir. Shall you be long?”

“ Not a quarter of an hour. I have not much to say,” he added, in a lower tone. Then he put on his hat, and went rapidly away from the inn.

CHAPTER XI.

“ONLY A CHILD OF SEVENTEEN!”

THERE was a light still in the front window of the cottage, which lay back from the road, and Ned Delancy advanced towards it steadily. He was resigned to the inevitable, as Hugh Aynard might have phrased it, and was prepared to face the worst. Facing the worst had given a stern expression to his features ; there were difficulties to encounter—perhaps a scene to escape—and he had planned his manner of action from the beginning to the end. He had made up his mind, and he was an obstinate man, not likely to change it.

He went straight to the cottage door, where he had seen Hugh Aynard part with Anne Judge ; there were no faltering steps as he approached the house, and the hand that was raised to knock shook with no excitement. His passion and irrelevant discourse had been for Aynard, and belonged to the past.

Here was a serious duty before him ; let him set

about it seriously, and not in the wild stagey manner of fools more weak than he.

Anne Judge opened the door very quickly to his summons.

“I think, Hugh, that I would not come back again to-night, for——” were her first words, then there was a long pause, a straining of her eyes into the darkness, where he stood the grim sentinel to challenge her want of faith in him.

“I am not your lover, Miss Judge,” he said, at last; “it is a mistake. I am Mr. Delancy.”

“Oh, Ned, you—it is you! What has happened—what can have happened—to bring you here to me?”

“Strange and improbable that I should come to you of all women in the world; but the incidents of life are ever a puzzle to man’s comprehension. May I trespass upon your hospitality for a few moments?”

“Ye—es, certainly; come in, please.”

And then Anne Judge, like a woman walking in her sleep, led the way to the front room, where, sitting before a fire heaped high with coals that wintry night, was the late housekeeper of Thirby Cross.

“Good-evening,” said Delancy, and Mrs. Judge responded “Good-evening,” in a thick, hoarse voice, and regarded him with half-shut eyes.

“My mother has been asleep; she—you will not mind her,” said Anne, in confusion; and then she sat down at the table, and looked across it very

wistfully at him who had been the hero of her fleeting dream.

"Why not mind me?" croaked forth Mrs. Judge. "Do you think—does Mr. Delancy think that I don't know him, or that I don't know what I am about?"

"If you would only go to your room," implored Anne.

"And leave you two to backbite me—to lay all the blame on me when I am not here to defend myself? Me, a long-suffering, misunderstood, ever-unfortunate wretch, to whom comfort cannot come."

"It is the sense of her misfortunes and errors," Anne Judge attempted to explain, "which makes her like this, at times."

"Not very often, only at times," muttered Mrs. Judge.

"Pray do not offer me any excuses, Miss Judge; I am not fond of them," said Delancy, "and I have not time at this hour to attend to them. Rather let me offer you, in the first place, my congratulations at the eligible offer of marriage which has been made you, and which you have accepted since we met last."

"Thank you," said Anne almost inaudibly, and stealing once more a look at his face, so very different a one from the face that she had gazed at long ago.

"Congratulations over, I have a few remarks to make," said Delancy; "and simply in my own defence. For though there was never an engagement between

you and me—though we were left free to act, and there is no right for me to utter one reproach—still I have spoken of love to you, and you to me."

"Oh, is this right now——" began Anne, when he broke in upon her appeal with his natural impatience, and with a fierce abruptness added thereto that was new to his listener.

"Yes, I think so, for I love you still. I cannot drop my affection or my folly all at once; I am not a woman—quick to respond, quick to forget."

"Hush, sir. This is not fair to Mrs. Delancy," said Anne, "and I will not listen to it. To me it is most cruel."

"I think——" began Mrs. Judge, when Delancy checked her more abruptly still.

"Madam, your interference will not mend matters, and merely delay an interview that I am not anxious to prolong," he said. "Spare me your comments at present. Miss Judge," turning to her again—"why is this not fair to my mother?"

"I did not mean your mother, but your wife."

"I have no wife."

"Not dead?" cried Anne. "Oh, Mr. Delancy, I hope not that."

"You have heard of my marriage with Lady Burlinson," said Delancy. "I was never married to her, Anne Judge. I fell in love with a child of seventeen—only a child of seventeen!—and thought no more of the woman

who was easily persuaded to surrender me. I entered on a second folly worse than the first, and have never again thought of Clara Burlinson."

"Not married," said Anne, clasping her hands together tightly. "Then that story of your engagement to her which Mr. Aynard told me——"

"Was false—every word of it."

"And the notice in the newspaper?"

"Was simply a second falsehood, blacker than the first, that was disproved two days afterwards. The invention of a little-minded wretch, who had his or her ends to satisfy by deceiving you."

"Mother," cried Anne turning at once to the woman by the fireside, who was crouching towards the blaze with her eyes steadily directed from them, "you can answer this—you know what this means? I am sure of it."

"I know nothing of it," murmured Mrs. Judge. "I will not be talked to like this, and harassed like this by you. I have done nothing. How is it possible?"

"But——" began Anne in an excited manner, and again Delancy interrupted her.

"It does not affect the subject which has brought me here," he said. "Pray do not disturb your mother at this juncture. If you had already begun to doubt me—if you were only waiting for this proof of my instability—what can a lying advertisement in a newspaper matter to us two? The story is ended—the con-

spirators have been successful, you have been deceived to your advantage, and are likely to make an excellent match."

"Oh, this is not like you," murmured Anne Judge.

"All this is very painful to us both. I will be brief," said Delancy. "I have no right to reproach you for accepting Mr. Aynard as a suitor: that is already understood between us. I have come here now in Mr. Aynard's interest, not my own."

Anne looked up surprised at this, and then her glance fell again, abashed at that pale, stern face, which nothing seemed to soften—not even her own distress, which would have brought him so closely to her side once.

"Mr. Aynard is my friend—he will always remain a friend in whom my interest will be great—he has been as a brother to me, and I think that I understand him. You know also—for he must be more dear to you than to me—what a weak man he is, how, with a mind undisturbed by doubts, and with even a semblance of happiness before him, he is likely to grow strong, and to become all that can be wished for in an English gentleman; but he is not made for trouble and jealousy: distrust and excitement are at all times calculated to bring about his downfall. It is for this reason I hope that you have kept back the story of how I loved you once; and for this reason I am sure you will for ever keep it from him now."

"No, I will not," cried Anne Judge, indignantly and defiantly at last. "You have no right to bind me to that promise. I will not consent to it."

"I have told him all that is sufficient—told him in one sense exactly the truth—that there was a little flirtation between us when he was engaged to Lady Burlinson, that I was a foolish fellow, and that you were a romantic girl—a child of seventeen—who knew not her own mind, and so no harm done on either side. Let him think so still."

"I will tell him all the truth," said Anne, very firm herself now. "I have nothing to regret—nothing to conceal."

"It is late in the day to begin that story," said Delancy. "Before the engagement it might have been related with some degree of grace and frankness; but now I can see nothing to follow save tribulation."

"Mr. Delancy is right," said Mrs. Judge. "Why try to make unhappiness everywhere, when there is a chance of comfort at the last?"

"Your mother reasons admirably," said Delancy, rising; and Anne Judge rose with him, firm still, and yet still bewildered by all that had occurred.

"I shall act for the best in my own judgment, Mr. Delancy. I would have told him before, but—"

She hesitated whether to continue or not, and this time he waited patiently for the conclusion of her sentence.

“But,” she added, with a suddenness that thrilled him despite the admirable command which he had resolved to exercise over his emotions, “I thought that you were ashamed of me! You had never told him—you whom I knew to be so frank and outspoken—of your love for me—my love for you,” she added boldly; “it had been kept a secret, as though you were ashamed of your past love for the child now that the woman whom you had first loved was by your side and free again. I believed in that engagement, because Mr. Aynard was my informant; I believed in the notice of your marriage, and I believed in the motive for your silence to your friend. I thought that you might be right to conceal our story from him, and there came a pride to me which kept my lips sealed. I would not be the first to speak.”

He remained silent, and she continued :

“I was hurt—hurt also that you had not the courage to write to my aunt and inform me through her of your engagement. I was jealous, sir—we were in trouble—I was urged on by many reasons, and when I was sure of your marriage, I felt free to accept Mr. Aynard and to forget you.”

“Had you loved me deeply, you would have had greater faith, Anne,” he said more sorrowfully and less sternly, “not have so readily framed your excuses, and believed in every one’s word but mine.”

Anne clasped her hands together and turned away

her head to hide the scalding tears in which her firmness had thus ended. It seemed that she had been too hasty—she could not explain everything; he did not care to listen to her, and she knew that there was no stepping back across the chasm which divided them. She had mistrusted him, and she had lost him.

"It has been, after all, an escape for you—for after all you were too young," he continued with that persistency as regarded her years which had been once a pleasant jest of his and now was cruel reasoning. "You have acted for the best, and you were right not to bind yourself by an engagement to me, knowing what a difference a few months' absence would make in your thoughts. You will love Hugh Aynard better than ever I should have been loved, for he is more calculated——"

"I do not love him," Anne interrupted in her turn. "Spare me such consolation as you are about to bestow. You know that I do not love Hugh Aynard."

"You are engaged to him."

"Yes, and I am trying to love him, as he is aware himself. I was trying, also, to forget you, who had married Lady Burlinson and grown ashamed of me."

"He need not know all this. If you have any esteem for him, Anne, you will spare him that humiliation. Let him believe you true and constant, not a woman as fickle as the rest of them, and quick to leap to conclusions which a word of her own or a letter from

her might have rectified. You are engaged to be his wife—to me you have always been Anne Judge, Spinster, holding aloof from me, denying me a sight of you, keeping me for ever in the background till I died out of your esteem."

"No, no," cried Anne, "you should be more merciful; you should think of me a little more, and not of your own wounded pride so much. Keep from me for ever—never see me again—but do not think the worst of me like this."

"Miss Judge, I am pleading for one of the few friends left me in this world—I am not thinking of myself."

"Nor of me," cried Anne.

"Of you I have no right to think—you are torn from me," he cried more passionately. "You have not trusted in me, and there is nothing can atone for that. I am unlucky in my loves, and there's an end of it. You will be happier with him than you would have ever been with a hard, exacting fellow who allows for no extenuating circumstances, and thinks only of his outraged dignity. If I should not have believed this story of you, had our positions been reversed, why, I am a strong man, and you were only seventeen when I was foolish enough to say I loved you. Only a child of seventeen—at the best, a woman with life opening out before her, and the world's temptations unknown to her—it is my fault for my rash haste to win you."

Forgive me, Anne ; Heaven bless you and your future!"

He turned away, and before she could answer him again he had left the house.

He did not return to the inn at Aber, and the landlord sat up for him in vain. There was nothing to stay for, and his presence would be only a shadow between the lovers which no effort of his own could remove.

Let him begone—like the marplot that he was—and forget, as best he could, how his last love story had terminated.

CHAPTER XII.

A SHORT ENGAGEMENT.

WHEN Hugh Aynard came down from his room the following morning, he was informed that his friend Mr. Delancy had not returned to the inn. He was quick to believe at all times in coming misfortune, and he turned at once upon his landlord.

“ Why did I not hear of this before ? ” he asked.
“ Why did you not come to my room last night ? ”

“ I thought that the gentleman had stopped at his friend’s, sir.”

“ What friend’s ? ”

“ He said that he had a visit to pay before he went to bed, and that we were not to mention to you his going out again.”

“ That is strange.”

The landlord did not mention that Mr. Delancy had said he should return in a quarter of an hour, but laid on the table a letter that had been sent by hand that morning to Mr. Aynard.

"Here is a letter for you which will explain it, I dare say, sir," said the host, and Aynard took up the note and read the following hastily-written lines:

"I shall be at the Glen at ten this morning. I wish to tell you all concerning Mr. Delancy.

"ANNE JUDGE."

Hugh Aynard studied this note very hard. When the waitress came in with his breakfast-tray he was still studying it—his elbows on the table, his hands holding his temples, and the letter spread out before him, as though it were a map wherein he could trace his future life, step by step, from her whose name was signed there.

He feared already that it was away from her—it was his ill-fortune, from which he was never to escape; and once again, by some strange mystery which was to him unfathomable, Delancy was the ruling influence pervading and marring everything. Could it be probable that Delancy had loved Anne Judge, and was that the clue to his eccentricities of the preceding evening? Could it be even possible that Anne Judge had loved Edmund Delancy?

No, no, he would not think that. There was a little to explain concerning that silly flirtation to which Delancy had alluded last night, and Anne Judge was anxious to tell him everything, however trifling it might be. Or she intended to relate the reason for Edmund

Delancy's absence, and was afraid that he might be nervous concerning it. She was a thoughtful girl, who studied every one, so far as it lay in her power.

He was in Aber Glen long before the appointed time. It was a bright morning—too bright to last, perhaps—and the stream brawled at his feet, and chafed itself amongst the boulders there with a pleasant tinkling as of music. The air was pure, the sky was bright, the firs upon the mountain sides were green still, and, looking back upon the sea beyond the Glen, all looked so peaceful that he could not believe—he would not believe—that any new trouble was advancing to him yet awhile. He was at the end of the Glen at last, where the rocks meet at Aber and bar further progress, and the stream comes dashing over them with a roar that goes on “for ever”—with a loud and deafening noise that November morning, for there had been heavy rains all the week, and the North Wales rivers, lakes, and streams were swollen with them; heavy rains and furious winds, the latter of which had not yet abated, for there was a fresh breeze in the Glen still, that fought with the waterfall, and dashed the spray upon the man who waited there.

Anne Judge was punctual. It was exactly ten by his watch when he saw her in the distance advancing towards him, in that mourning which she still wore for her father. He hastened to join her, and the sad look on the face into which he stooped and gazed was

sufficient warning to him. He saw at once that there were fresh troubles in store for him, and that the peace of mind and the rest that he craved were not for him yet.

“Anne, what has happened ?” he asked, in a faltering voice ; “nothing very serious, I hope ?”

“Nothing that is very serious, I hope too, Hugh,” she answered kindly.

Then there was a silence, and they walked on together to the waterfall, where the noise would not have allowed them to speak had they been disposed just then. It was when they were proceeding slowly towards the mouth of the Glen again that Anne said suddenly :

“I am going to ask your forgiveness for a very great mistake that I have made ; so great a one that it seems like the one mistake of my life, for it affects those who have not deserved it.”

“It affects you, then ?”

“Yes, it affects me with the rest, but I have been to blame.”

“In what ?”

“In consenting to an engagement between us, Mr. Aynard ; forgive me, but it must be cancelled at once.”

“Anne, that is not fair to me,” he cried impetuously ; “I will not consent to that. I have a right to bind you by your promise to me, and you should take your time to love me. We have been engaged twenty-four

hours, and you cannot be tired of me already—cannot have seen, I hope, my unfitness to be anything but the miserable wretch which I have always been."

"I wish you to listen to me calmly, Hugh, and then I will hear your reply."

She soothed him by the mention of his christian name, but the tones were like a sister's to him, gentle, dispassionate, and unwavering.

"Proceed, Anne, I will not interrupt you again."

He walked on with a step that was somewhat irregular, as though he had been drinking, and where the path allowed, Anne Judge took his arm and went on side by side with him. He did not break in upon her explanation, but heard her uncomplainingly and to the bitter end.

"Ours was a strange engagement, fettered by many conditions," began Anne Judge. "We were to make quite sure that it would be in our power to love one another before we were married, I knowing that you had not wholly forgotten Lady Burlinson, you being told that I had already, and despite my youth, met with what the world calls a disappointment. You spoke of love for me, but I would not acknowledge it at once as love, and I claimed the right for time and thought for myself. But it was understood that we were for the time engaged, and I fancied then that I should make you a good wife one day, and that you would quickly learn to think so."

She would have preferred him replying to her then, but he was faithful to his word, and did not respond, unless a grave inclination of his head might be taken for his answer. No explanation had ensued ; this was simply the preface leading up to it.

“ It would have been fairer for me to have told you who had won upon my girl’s heart, and before I had married you, you would have learned the story,” she continued ; “ but you were impetuous, and would not listen to me, nor let me tell you that it was Edmund Delancy whom I loved—whom I have distrusted, and who loved me very, very much, and with a greater faith than mine, before last night’s revelation turned him for ever from me. Pardon me, you whom I have also deceived, but I thought that he had forgotten me, that I was only a child in his estimation, that he was married, and for ever set apart from any thought of mine. I was hasty—I was jealous and rash, perhaps, and had he married Clara, I must have outlived every thought of one who had treated me with such complete indifference. But he was true ; and I, urged on by my mother, deceived by her—forgive that explanation for the daughter’s sake—and pitying you as one misunderstood and unappreciated, acted wrongly in my false ideas of kindness, and injured him as well as his friend. Will that friend forgive me ? I thought myself a heroine in my conceit—I find that I am weak as water.”

Aynard pressed her hand to his side for a moment, and then let it drop from his arm, moving even a step or two away from her.

“Anne, I have nothing to forgive,” he said sadly. “I have been disappointed, that is all—and by this time I should be used to that. I understand your explanation—I see the great trouble from which you have escaped. I have stood between you and Delancy, and have with my hateful blundering separated you for ever from him. It is all over with my last dream. I am a man doomed to render miserable every living soul whose path I cross. I have tried not to believe this, against every truth that rose before me like a curse, but the knowledge has advanced for all that, and I shall not resist it any more. He took me from myself into the world again of which I was weary, and this is the result.”

“No, not the result, Hugh,” said Anne; “this is the ending of a folly before fresh complications have arisen. We strike at the root of it, and end it.”

“Its roots were in my heart,” he answered.

“He wished me, in his generosity and in his thought for you, Hugh, to keep this a secret, fearing that you had not the courage to bear it bravely. But it was not like him to advise me to deceive you, even for your own sake, and I had deceived you too much already.”

“It is best as it is; thank you for the truth,” he

answered. "I will bear it my own way, and not like a coward."

"That is well said, Hugh. And in good time——"

"Which is not for me to look forward to, or for you to point out to me, Anne," he answered ; "for ever after this let me be guided by my own will, and judge for myself what is best. Good-bye."

He shook hands with her, and she hoped that he had forgiven her—really forgiven her for the error of which they had been both the victims.

"I have nothing to forgive," he reiterated, "and I have to ask pardon myself for my pertinacity—for my own belief in Delancy's engagement to Lady Burlinson, and which helped towards the great mistake. Think no more of me, or of the sorrow that I feel at losing you. My sorrows are very near the end. Good-bye, Anne ; remember the friend sometimes, and let your pity begin where your trust in me ended."

"I trust in you still, Hugh, with a greater, stronger trust than ever."

"But not the trust which places your future in my hands, and which I yearned for in my mad plunge from the desolation from which there was no escape. Good-bye. I don't think we shall ever meet again."

"You will not act rashly?"

"Never again rashly," he answered ; then he walked rapidly away from her, and left her lingering in the Glen.

She must have lingered there for a longer time than she was aware, thinking of Aynard and Delancy, and hoping that she had broken the truth gently, and like a sister, to the former, and that all would after that be well with him ; for when she looked up again the blue sky had vanished, and the dull grey clouds of yesterday, and of all the week preceding, had come again, like a picture of her future life. The wind had increased also, and the branches of the trees were tossing wildly to and fro ; the storm was once more threatening Aber, and she would be lucky to escape it, and reach home before the deluge.

She made a few steps forward in haste, and then the rain descended heavily, and she ran for the shelter of a little cottage that stood near the bridge which spans the stream at Aber, and from which she was not many yards away.

She entered the cottage hastily, and a man and woman, who had also taken shelter from the storm there, recoiled as she appeared before them, and backed away from her in their amazement.

“ Mother,” she cried, “ you here !”

“ I was coming in search of you—you alarmed me by your absence.”

“ In search of me, and with that man !”

“ I—I don’t know this man, my child.”

“ It is false ! I know him for all his disguise—this is Doctor Day, the man I hate,” cried Anne Judge.

CHAPTER XIII.

GIVEN UP.

THE man whom Anne Judge hated, and who was only disguised by his poverty and general deplorableness, continued to back until the opposite wall was reached, and then stood there an abject wretch enough, afraid to face a woman's scorn of him.

Mrs. Judge was stronger and bolder in this emergency ; her daughter's anger she thought easy to quell, and her appearance there more easy to account for, even though she had been watching Aynard and Anne, with this man as fellow-spy.

“ Well, then, Anne, it is Doctor Day,” she confessed, “ a man who has been unfortunate, and wicked even ; but has the one merit of not forgetting me, and who has again repeated his offer of marriage to me. If I decline it, it is for your sake.”

“ I would not advise you to study me again,” said Anne, very firm but very pale.

“ If you have foolishly broken off this engagement

with Mr. Aynard, as you threatened to do," said Mrs. Judge, "I must live for you and study you somehow—Heaven knows in what manner!"

"Miss Judge, though I have feared a meeting of this kind," began Day, very humbly, "I have long wished to——"

"Silence, sir. What right have you to speak to me? How dare you face with your insolence the daughter of the man whose honour you tarnished, and whose heart you broke?"

"Anne, we will not speak of the past," urged the mother, trembling now, for the daughter's manner was new, and not yet understood; "we were all to blame, your father with the rest, and we have suffered for our want of charity."

"For our want of principle, two of us," said Anne Judge, quickly.

"I will not have this," cried the mother, more warmly, "it is not a time to begin the old reproaches, Anne."

"It is better that I should withdraw," said Doctor Day, moving to the door, and then arrested by the quick, impatient "Stay" of the younger woman, who barred his exit from the room by standing between him and the Glen.

"Stay," she said, "now you are here, sir, and have begun your plotting against me, as you begun it long ago against my father. You were in the scheme to

deceive me and Mr. Aynard—you and my mother have made all this mischief, and for your own ends. I see it all."

"It was for your good, Anne," said the mother.

"I deny—" began Day, and then the mother's more hasty answer giving the lie to his own, he was silent.

"I do not care for excuses or falsehoods now, mother," said Anne; "whatever has affected or darkened my life does not matter much in comparison with what I see here. I find you with that dastard—I meet you with the man who helped to kill my father, whose head was never raised again after his abuse of confidence in both of you; I find you, mother—you of all women, knowing what he is, and professing repentance for the past—with him again, plotting against the child whom you profess to love. I see my father restless in his grave at all the danger threatening me, and I forfeit every grain of self-respect by believing in you ever any more. So I give you up."

"No, no, Anne, this cannot be."

"The woman who was true to him and me—misunderstood, unloved, and yet for ever faithful to us—I return to," cried Anne. "My security is by her side, not the mother's, and I had better live for her than you."

"You are excited—you do not know what you are saying," said Mrs. Judge, more like a woman inclined

to resist. "I am not to be frightened in this manner by a few words of a romantic girl. I have acted for the best, and if mistakes have occurred you must not throw the blame on me. I will not have it. I am your mother, and I exercise the right to protest against it."

Anne Judge pointed to Doctor Day again. "This man is your friend?"

"Yes—your friend as well as mine, I hope."

"You trust in him?"

"Yes."

"Renounce him!"

"Anne, I will not be dictated to," cried Mrs. Judge, indignantly. "If he has his faults——"

"Renounce him," repeated Anne Judge, "or I go."

"This is a madness born of a girl's disappointment in her lover, part of the folly that has separated you from Mr. Aynard this morning. I must have time to think."

"Time to think!" cried Anne Judge, passionately: "time to think whether this man or I shall be your friend? Did you hear me say just now that I would go away?"

"I do not believe it."

"I will not be the object of your plotting—I will not have the shadow of that man between us. I am going away at once."

"You will soon be glad enough to come back," said Mrs. Judge, with a scornful laugh. "Your aunt will kill you with her bad temper, her fretfulness, her want

of affection. I tell you, Anne, that you are not treating me well, or with proper respect, before Mr. Day, who has come here to make atonement——”

“ His atonement is a mockery—I will not listen to it,” cried the daughter, indignantly. “ Your hesitation is an offence to me, and that man’s presence here burns my cheek with shame. You have plotted against me, and I forgive you. But beyond there I see my father beckoning me away to the peace and security apart from you, and—I go !”

She passed swiftly from the house into the tempest of wind and rain that still rioted in the Glen; she would remain no longer with them. The mother had been no truer to her than to the husband, and there was danger in her stay.

Let her be gone, heartbroken, from the woman to whom she had been ready to devote her life, and in whose repentance she had believed. She had no power to influence her for good ; she had been betrayed, and there seemed darker and more dreadful days looming from the future, from which even she—full of love and anxious to forget—recoiled with horror. There was no one to protect her there—let her protect herself, at least. It was her duty, and it led her from the mother. The wind and rain without met her with their angry welcome ; but she was not daunted by them. She went on proudly and firmly through them, and felt that it was best.

CHAPTER XIV.

AUNT JUDGE RECEIVES MORE VISITORS.

THE wind and the rain which had set in tempestuously at Aber, had not spared that part of the coast of England where we first met our characters.

Ilpham-on-the-Cliff had suffered with other towns and villages that bordered on the sea, from which the great wind had seemed to come in all directions and with a mighty force. The sea had risen there, and carried away more of the land that faced it; it had leaped the flint wall round the coastguard houses which were on the lower land, destroyed all the "properties," and filled the cottages with water; it had dashed into the basement of Markham's Hotel, found its way into the cellars and played havoc with the wines; it had carried boats from their moorings, and shaved the jetty of all its landing-stairs and under platforms, which it bore away triumphantly and to the despair of the proprietor, who by the tenure of his lease was to make good all repairs; it had frightened good

Mrs. Simmonds, though she was used to Ilpham, by pouring down her area, keeping the basement floor some feet in water all that tide, and threatening to come up-stairs into the parlour; it had rendered the Parade a portion of the sea, and was trying hard—as in the old days of which Hugh Aynard had once spoken—to wash dead folk from their graves; it had paid a visit into the High Street, damaging many goods at the bazaar, and pausing only at a little distance from the Gull Inn, as though it was waiting to see the husbands' coach come in from Wolchester.

But the husbands' coach was locked up for the season in the great stable at the back of the house, and the horses, to quote Mr. Pownie, were eating their blessed 'eads off as fast as it was possible. The carrier's cart went twice a week to Wolchester and back, not always coming back, but halting at Thirby Cross, as if in contempt of business at Ilpham now that all the visitors had gone.

The carrier's cart brought Anne Judge to Thirby the morning of the following day on which she had left her mother.

She had been travelling all yesterday from Wales to London, from London to Wolchester, and in the morning she had started again for Thirby Cross, eager for the shelter of home, and the sight of the one friend that was left to her.

Only one friend now! Delancy was gone away from

her for ever, and her mother, after all, had not loved her well enough to promote her happiness, but had plotted and schemed against her, as though the daughter was her greatest enemy.

She was sorry for her mother, but not for the step that had separated them ; she pitied the mother's weakness, and deplored her own want of power to make her strong, but she saw the evil which was gathering around herself in the mad confidence of Mrs. Judge in Day, and she fled from it to a purer sphere. If the mother loved her as dearly as in the old times she had professed to do, she might come some day to Thirby Cross in search of her, and beg for the daughter's confidence once more. But let them stand apart for ever, thought Anne, rather than that she should call Doctor Day her friend.

She said this, and more than this, when she was weeping in Aunt Judge's arms, and the stern woman had begged her, no longer sternly, to be strong, and trust in the future days in store for her.

“ You and I together, Anne, need not be so very miserable,” said Aunt Judge, “ even if the worst should happen.”

“ What is the worst ?” asked her niece.

“ The pride or the obstinacy of Delancy which keeps him back from you, and never forgives the one mistake. A good man, but very stubborn, and as proud of his stubbornness as he is of his honour.”

"I am not thinking of him, aunt," said Anne Judge. "He was right to upbraid me, and I was wrong to believe in anything but his own word. I shall never see him again."

"I am not so sure of that," said Mary Judge thoughtfully; "but I would not reckon upon the meeting or—on him."

"I—I don't think that I could marry him now," said Anne timidly. "I should feel that I was not the Anne Judge whom he loved first because she was firm to one idea, but another woman, very weak and very unfit for him."

"Where is Mr. Aynard?"

"I do not know," answered Anne Judge. "I hope that he will not come to Thirby."

"He need not see you for the few days that we remain in this house."

"The few days?" repeated Anne inquiringly.

"We are proud people in our way, we Judges," said Aunt Mary, "and cannot stop here. You, who might have been Mr. Aynard's wife, must not live at Thirby Cross as the niece of Mr. Aynard's housekeeper; here you have been a guest, my dear."

"But you resign this place for me—you—"

"Anne, I would have given up my life for you long ago, much less a place like this," said Aunt Judge warmly. "You have been everything to me from the day *she* left you a little motherless girl. One of my

greatest temptations was to spoil you in my pity for you, and one of my greatest errors, was the total concealment of my affection ; I turned you against me.”

“No, you made me strong, and when the mask dropped on the day I first came here, I knew how much you loved me, and how much I loved you. For ever after that day, no misunderstanding, aunt.”

“I am a suspicious woman, but I cannot see you turning from me again.”

“And when the mother comes——”

“She will not come, Anne ; she will marry George Day if he will have her at the eleventh hour. Did your mother ever tell you in her wild confessions that I loved that man once ?”

“Yes,” answered Anne.

“And said it was my jealousy that made her resentful and rash. Poor woman, I dare say that I was jealous enough, but my fault was in trying to save her. Well, Anne, I speak of this because I am a woman who lost her lover, and see how strong and content I am.”

“Ah, but you did not lose him by your own want of confidence.”

“Still I lost him ; it was for the best, I see, and if you lose Edmund Delancy it is for the best too, I am sure.”

It was poor consolation at that time, and Anne did

not care to continue the discussion. She was tired, and her heart was heavy. Aunt Judge persuaded her to lie down in her room—her own room, where Delancy had been nursed back from danger, and had told her that he loved her—and thither she repaired with her aunt.

“It is like home again,” she murmured; then, before drawing down the blind to exclude the light, she looked across the wintry landscape anxiously.

“What are you looking for, Anne?”

“For the old boat-house in the Backwater, where Delancy signalled to me once to come and help him, and I felt how much I loved him for the first time. Oh, aunt, I thought that I was going to lose him then, and had no right to mourn for him.”

“For you it might have been all the better, Anne,” said Aunt Judge, with one of her gloomy thoughts rising to the surface, after the habit of old times, “and then all the mistakes and troubles would have been avoided.”

“Should I have ever known how dear I was to him once?” she sighed.

“Well, that is a fair reminiscence with a man as good as he is,” replied the aunt, “and we will say no more about it. Can you see the boat-house still?”

“Yes; very faintly, through the rain and mist. It looks more of a ruin than ever.”

“That is very likely, in such weather as this. Now try and sleep, my dear.”

Aunt Judge kissed her and departed. She went at

once to her own room, a few doors down the corridor, and which had been once occupied by Mrs. Delancy, and then she knelt down and prayed for the better days of Anne Judge, and for a something better and brighter than life with one who loved her very much but who knew her own faults and grim tempers passing well.

Anne slept long and peacefully, and Aunt Judge did not wake her. Looking in at dusk, the housekeeper saw that the niece still slept, and so stole out again, thinking how sound a slumber it was, and how tired the dear girl must have been.

It was a dark night, with the wind howling round the house, and the rain-drops clattering like small shot on the window-glass, when Hugh Aynard came back to his home. The servant admitted him, and the house-keeper was quick upon the servant's heels to bid him welcome.

A very pale, grave-faced man he looked, in the light of the hall lamp—the man with the old looks upon him—gloomy, dark, and full of misery—the man who in every step of life had met unhappiness, despite all the wealth by which he was surrounded.

“Good evening, Miss Judge,” he said; “your niece is here, I trust?”

“For a few days, sir, and with your permission.”

“I have seen her mother. She told me that they had separated, and Anne is in the right. Give me that light, please.”

Aunt Judge had a candlestick in her hand, and he took it from her and went up the broad staircase, followed by his housekeeper.

“Are there any commands, sir?”

“Not any.”

“You will stay here to-night?”

“I do not stay here five minutes.”

“I wished to speak to you about leaving here, sir.”

“Pray speak to the steward, Miss Judge, if you are tired of the place.”

He passed Anne’s room, the servants’ stairs leading to the hall, and then paused at the door of the press-room on the other side, looking hard at his housekeeper for the first time.

“I think, Miss Judge, that you may as well see where I put a paper, which is of importance to some friends of mine,” he said, as he drew a key from his pocket and unlocked the door.

They entered the room, which was damp and close, and full of dust—a room symbolical of ruin and neglect—and he walked at once to an iron safe let in the wall, unlocked it, placed a paper within it, relocked it, and gave Aunt Judge the key.

“It is safer there than in the care of a solicitor’s clerk after the master has gone home,” he said thoughtfully. “It is safer there altogether, perhaps. When you are asked for it give it them.”

“What paper is it, Mr. Aynard?”

“ My will, written last night, at Aber. A wise precaution. Life is uncertain at the best ; and at the worst —very uncertain indeed.”

“ I hope, Mr. Aynard, that you meditate nothing that is foolish,” said Aunt Judge, very boldly and firmly. “ My experience has lain a great deal with the rash and unfortunate, and I am a woman whose advice may be worth taking.”

“ I have listened to much advice in my time, but it has always done me harm,” he replied ; “ for ever after this I follow my own, madam.”

They went out of the press-room, which he locked, and the key of which he also tendered to Aunt Judge.

“ Keep that for them, too.”

“ For whom ?”

“ For those who will ask you for it presently.”

“ Mr. Aynard, there is a mystery in this which I do not like,” said Aunt Judge firmly.

“ Miss Judge,” he answered, “ I am not going to kill myself ; I am too great a coward.”

“ I am glad to receive that answer,” said Mary Judge, “ for it is a cowardly action to seek to escape from the life which has been wisely given you. Whilst there is life there is hope for God’s unfortunates.”

He shook his head, as though he protested against his servant’s preaching to him, and then he went along the corridor, down the great stairs, and into the hall.

A moment afterwards the door slammed behind him, and woke up Anne Judge.

The aunt and niece talked over the arrival and departure of the master of Thirby till a late hour, looked more than once anxiously into the night, and ta points where Aynard's Roost was seen at daylight; but though the light shone forth there as in the old days when Hugh's mind was ill at ease, the driving rain and mist concealed it from their view.

"You are not afraid to sleep alone in this room, my dear?" asked Aunt Judge.

"Not I, aunt."

"You are welcome to a portion of my own. I think that it is best."

"No, this is a favourite room of mine, and I was never a nervous girl for all the strange things that they tell me have happened in this house since Sir Rupert Aynard built it. Has anything stranger happened here, I wonder, than the incidents of my own profitless existence?"

"That is talking like Hugh Aynard, Anne; that is foolish talk."

"Yes, so it is," Anne confessed, "and it shall not occur again. Good-night."

The housekeeper went to her room, but she was not inclined to sleep that night. She had had much to disturb her, and she deviated from her usual rule, and sat reflecting on all that had occurred that day,

and on the reasons for Mr. Aynard's confidence in her.

"After all, his nature is to trust in some one," she said, "and what does he know of me, to give me the keys of his safe and the press-room? Supposing—What's that?"

A woman keenly alive to noises in the house was Aunt Judge—one imbued with a sense of new responsibility, now that two extra keys were in her charge, and events out of the common order seemed marching to her, one by one.

She sat quite still and listened; she opened her door and listened; she went out into the dark corridor, listening still, and as silent as the dead there—a firm woman on watch.

There was a noise in the house, she was assured at last—a clicking noise, as of the opening of an iron safe; and she darted back into her room, opened a drawer, and took therefrom the pistol with which one night she had surprised Edmund Delancy.

She had never considered herself quite secure at the house at Thirby Cross, and had been prepared for the something that might happen in the defence of her master's property, and that something had happened at last, or she was easily scared for once in her life.

She hastened into the corridor, without the light—she felt that she was safer in the dark with a stranger to whom the house was unfamiliar—and she walked

slowly towards the press-room. Before she had reached it, a shadowy figure came stealing from the open door ; she saw the outline, she heard it breathing, and her voice rang out with a distinctness that was startling indeed :

“Don’t move a step, or I fire ! Who are you ? Speak !”

There was a long silence, and she could see the figure crouching towards the floor, as though fearful that the pistol might be fired at it, and then there was a sudden dash towards the narrow stairs that led into the hall. Aunt Judge did not follow, but ran along the corridor to the broad landing and the grand staircase, down which she went a few steps, and then peered over.

It was somewhat lighter there, and she could almost see the pattern of the marble floor.

“He will come this way,” she thought, and then she called out “Stop !” again the instant afterwards, and a man ran up the stairs, as though to daunt her, or overpower her before the house was roused, and she fired at him as he came towards her.

CHAPTER XV.

AN ATTEMPT AT ATONEMENT.

THE man at whom Aunt Judge fired gave a cry of anguish, clapped one hand to his arm, and staggered backwards down the stairs, missing his footing at the last, and falling heavily upon the marble pavement, where he lay stunned for awhile.

Aunt Judge, like a woman of business, followed him gravely and methodically, stooped over him, and took from his breast pocket a paper that had shown itself there, and at which his hand had instinctively grasped as he fell.

Before the wounded man had recovered from his stupor, the frightened maidservants were screaming inquiries from their rooms, and Anne's voice was heard over the balusters, saying, "Aunt, what is it?"

"Nothing of importance," said Mary Judge—"a rat, that is all."

"What is that lying in the hall?"

"The rat itself, my dear. Keep the servants from

coming down here ; it is not necessary ; and go to bed yourself. This poor wretch cannot hurt me."

But Anne Judge had an opinion of her own upon this point, and having obeyed her aunt's directions so far as the servants were concerned, she came stealing presently towards the scene of action, light in hand. She found the man sitting up against the oaken wainscot, with Aunt Mary tying about his wounded arm her own handkerchief and his.

"I shall bleed to death," murmured the man, "and——"

"What does it matter if you do?" answered Aunt Judge.

Anne looked more intently into the face of the man who had broken into the house, and recognized the beardless Doctor Day.

"Aunt, is it he?" she gasped forth.

"Yes, it is George Seymour, or George Day," said Mary Judge. "If I had only known that he had changed his name to Day when he first came to Ilpham, what a different life it might have been for all of us! There, get up, you villain, and be thankful that I have not shot you dead."

Doctor Day rose with difficulty, and looked askance at Anne Judge, and at a formidable sword which she had found somewhere, and was holding in her disengaged hand.

"Anne, I wish that you would go to your room,"

said Aunt Judge crossly, for her bad tempers would arise at times, and she had been excited very much. "That is a ridiculous Joan of Arc figure to assume to-night. I do not want any assistance. I am not afraid of this wretched creature."

"But, aunt, if——"

"Oh, he will do nothing now that we know him; the gentleman only fights in the dark like a bravo. Besides, there is another barrel to this pistol, and I think that he is afraid of it. Please put the light there, and leave me to talk to him."

Anne obeyed reluctantly, and went up-stairs again as far as the corridor, where she waited till the interview was terminated—a sentinel on duty prepared for active service.

Aunt Judge addressed the man standing before her with his hand pressed to his arm, and he flinched and looked away from her. A pitiable specimen of a villain he appeared; a thin, pinched-faced, shabbily-attired man, who it was hard to believe had ever been a man well-to-do, and a man looked up to, trusted, and loved. But how recklessness and want of principle will debase a man, those who have studied human nature know too well without any homily of ours.

"Am I to consider myself your prisoner, Miss Judge?" asked Doctor Day, nervously. "How—how do you know that I was not sent by Mr. Aynard for that paper?"

"I know that very well indeed," said Aunt Judge. "And if you defend yourself or your actions in that manner, you pass from here to the lock-up at Thirby Cross."

He appeared to reflect for a few moments on the warning that the stern woman gave him, then he said deliberately :

"I will tell the truth, and you will spare me the disgrace, I hope. I am in great pain ; pray be brief with me."

"How did you get into the house?"

"By the door disused in the tower."

"You have a key to it?"

"Yes."

"Give it me."

"It is in the lock of the door now," he answered, "and the key of the press-room as well."

"How did you get those keys?"

"I have had duplicates of them for two years, little thinking that I should want them for this purpose, or be reduced so low as to steal into the house like a thief, on desperate ventures of this kind. Heaven forgive me ! what a miserable wretch I am ! how temptation after temptation rises up to confront me, no matter how I strive against it ! Mary, I have been tempted more than other men, and so have sunk more. Pity me rather than hate me for that."

"I—I think," said Aunt Judge, with suppressed

passion, "that if you say 'Mary' again, I shall fire at you. I don't want to hear your sickly sentiment or your sham repentance : I know you too well, Seymour, now, and don't believe in your professions. What did you want with this will of Mr. Aynard's?—of what value was it to you?"

He hesitated again, then he said :

"I will tell all. I am very, very sorry. I wish that I had died before I came here, but it was my last chance ; everything else was fading from me, and I was very desperate. A wild chance—but still there was one—and I dashed at it and lost it, like the unlucky fool that I have ever been. That will leaves all Mr. Aynard's property to your niece, Anne Judge."

Mary Judge started at this, and immediately placed the document in her bosom for security's sake.

"Go on. What good was the will to you, then?"

"I—yes, I will tell you all," he stammered forth, "for my soul is heavy with its weight of sin, and this is the last—the very last—act of wickedness that I will do in life, if I am spared to get over this accident. I call Heaven to witness that—I—"

"What good was the will to you?" repeated Aunt Judge.

"Mr. Aynard made it at Aber, before he came on here; Mrs. Judge witnessed it. He wished it to be done, because he had been the means of separating your niece from Mr. Delancy, and of darkening irre-

trievably her life. It was left to her on condition that she married Edmund Delancy within two years from his death—to bribe her and Delancy indirectly into a marriage—a mad will altogether."

"Yes, a strange will, and you very properly wished to make a little alteration in it," said Mary Judge drily. "And if they had not married, what then?"

"The money went to his cousin, Felix Aynard, the man who tried to turn his brain with law-suits, and who is completely unworthy of the gift. Let me go now; you can understand the rest: I shall faint here—die here—if you do not spare me."

"You will find a clever surgeon in the village to attend to your arm. You have not far to go; but go you do not until I hear the whole of the story. The will in your hands—what then?"

"It would have been destroyed," was the reluctant answer.

"Ah, and then there would have been a will remaining of an earlier date, and that would have suited your views of justice better?"

"Yes. He told Mrs. Judge that his previous will bequeathed all his money to my sister Clara. She has been injured by his want of stability, and has a right to it. It was for my sister's sake, not my own, that I acted in this foolish manner."

"Your sister, whom you would have sought out again—a penitent man—had she become rich, and have

deceived by your pretences of amendment. Well, Doctor Day, the scheme would not have been a bad one—and would have been worthy of you—if you could have reckoned on Mr. Aynard's death to-night. Otherwise, it is a weak and childish plot that—— Man," she cried suddenly, "there is something more, which you conceal. Surely—surely, you have not murdered him!"

"Murdered him?—can you think so badly of me as that? Murder—great Heaven, of what do you accuse me?"

"You would have killed Edmund Delancy once."

"I struck him down in self-defence; and to save my own life, perhaps, for he was a powerful man, and would not listen to my explanations."

"Where is Mr. Aynard?"

"At his Roost in the Backwater. I saw him row off there five hours ago."

"The place is not safe—the foundation has been undermined by the sea—to-night's tempest may sweep it away. They were speaking of it to-day at Thirby, and of the wreck that it had become. This was your chance."

"I deny nothing; I am frank with you," said Day. "He may have killed himself—for he was weary of the world—or he may have intended to die quietly in that boat-house to which he has set forth; but, in either case, we shall not see Hugh Aynard alive again."

“ You cannot be sure of this ?”

“ Aynard’s Roost was washed away by the sea an hour ago !”

“ How do you know ?” cried the housekeeper.

“ I was at Erlsford, near here, and heard the place give way. Some boatmen rowed in the storm towards it, and brought back the news that not a vestige of it remained, and that the island on which it stood was covered by the sea. It was an awful tide, that swept off everything.”

Aunt Judge let the pistol drop from her hand to the floor in dismay, and the wounded man stooped towards it, when she scared him back by her sharp voice again.

“ Desist—begone ! you are the evil fiend himself, I think.”

She snatched up her pistol again, and then opened the great door and motioned him to depart.

He was glad to escape, and he moved towards the door with great alacrity, nursing his wounded arm as he went.

“ One moment,” said Aunt Judge, and he paused again at her appeal. “ You have let Mr. Aynard go to his death without a warning ; but you have not killed him ?”

“ On my soul, no ! Here I swear——”

“ That will do. Pass from here, and this ill-fated house, and let not your shadow trouble us again. If

Hugh Aynard died to-night, pray that you may not be as near your own death, with one passing you by and saying nothing."

"His blood is not on my head," muttered Day; "I am free from that. I could not have reasoned with him upon his danger, for he would not have listened to his old friend."

"Where is Anne's mother?"

"I do not know. She has treated me cruelly; she quarrelled with me at Aber, and I came on to London. I shall never see her again. I would have married her, even at the last—when the match was broken off between her daughter and Aynard, and she was poor and wretched—but she reviled me, and said that I had helped to rob her of her child. I never loved her, I believe. I was led away from you whom I did love, Mary, and to whom even now, as an atonement for the bitter past, and to prove how sorry I am at all that has separated us, I——"

The door slammed upon him, and he was shut out beneath the porch before he had concluded his last offer of marriage, and made one more shabby attempt at what he called atonement. He muttered an oath at the last indignity that had been proffered him, and then went out into the rain and wind, nursing his arm and moaning with pain. He looked back towards the house, and cursed it and all in it, before he passed along the winding drive that hid it from him. There were

lights flashing in the windows, he saw ; the whole house was astir with new confusion. Aunt Judge had already given out the news.

“They are going to the rescue of a man who, if not crushed in the fall of the Roost, was swept out to sea an hour ago,” he said. “Always inconsiderate and mad, these women. Who but a madwoman would have shot at me like a dog, when I was going up-stairs to beg pardon for the fright that I had given her? Let me be quit of them all for ever. I am unlucky here.”

As he passes into the road, darkened by the trees, he passes away for ever from our story. By those whose lives he tried to mar, and all of whom he influenced so much, he was never seen again. In a French prison there is a man like him, serving out a long sentence with a chain to his leg, but he shakes his head when they ask him of his friends, and answers that he has not any in the world. A hard-working, patient man—now that he is one of a gang and there are unsympathetic taskmasters over him—a man who the priest thinks is truly repentant for the sins of his earlier life : for he cries very bitterly, and speaks constantly of his wish to make reparation—atonement—for all the errors of his unfortunate career.

CHAPTER XVI.

“ HOME !”

GEORGE DAY had spoken the truth for once in his life. Five hours before the attempt at will-stealing, Hugh Aynard had rowed away from the boat-house at the end of his park in the direction of Aynard's Roost. He had unlocked the shed, drawn forth his boat, and started in the wind and rain to his old study, wherein he had studied nought but misery when seeking shelter there. Years ago he had hidden away from his enemies ; now he was anxious to hide for ever from his friends—to escape them and their arguments—to perplex them no longer with his grave mistakes—but to die away from them, as he was sure that he should die now.

He went away not without his warning, for he had heard at Thirby of the storms with which Ilpham had been troubled, and of the dangers with which his boat-house in the Backwater had been threatened, and he exulted in the thought of the desolation that would

meet him there. Some one had prophesied that the Roost would not stand till morning if the sea and wind rose as high next tide as it had done the last, and he had listened with a gloomy satisfaction, although he discredited the prophecy.

"It will be like the sea itself in the Backwater if the wind keeps up," they said at Thirby, and the wind increased rather than diminished, and was constant to its old fierce quarter, whence all the havoc seemed to be impelled.

It was like the sea itself two hours before high tide, when he started on his darksome journey, assured that there was depth of water sufficient to enable him to reach his home. His home, where he had troubled no one, and where Delancy had twice troubled him, and been the cause each time of raising false hopes from which he had suffered terribly. His home, where he was sure that he should die, and die soon. He might feel as strong as ever, but he was convinced that he was near the end, and that there were no more follies or mistakes to make. The storm might sweep him away a few days before his time, but die he must there, and when weary of waiting for death the temptation to meet it half-way might come upon him with a stronger force. Death was the fitting bride for him, he thought, and he would spend his honeymoon at the Roost, as he had once told Edmund Delancy when he was less firm and less unhappy.

The new housekeeper at Thirby Cross, the cold, grave-looking woman whom Delancy had placed there, had said to him an hour ago, "Whilst there is life, there is hope for God's unfortunates," but there was no hope for him, he felt assured. He desired no hope; and he was going to his Roost to bar himself from those who would speak of it again, and pain him with their mockery of condolence.

He rode away with a hopeless face enough, the face of a man who was not likely to live long with such despair at his heart. The boat tossed through the angry waters like a child's toy, and he had chosen the lightest, frailest, fair-weather craft for his journey, as though anxious to offer every chance to the elements to sweep him off from life. Still he rowed well, and the instinct to make for shelter and save the boat from sinking he could not wholly subdue, for all the bitterness of his thoughts. Once he ran aground, for the waves carried him out of his right course, and he waited patiently for the water's greater depth, with the rain hurling at him, and the rage of the wind compelling him to bow his head submissively; but he made no rash plunge towards another world; he preferred that which he called his fate to meet him, rather than to rashly seek his fate. He was prepared—that was all.

When he was afloat again he rowed with all his strength to the Roost, reaching it with difficulty, for

the wind and tide were both against him, and it was only by desperate exertion and by drifting at last into the current that the place was reached.

“Home!” he muttered, as he sprang from his boat and found the patch of grass on which Aynard’s Roost was built covered with water that the last tide had left. The last tide had been half-way up the boat-house too, for he could see the water-mark far above his reach.

He spent some time securing his boat by a stout rope to the steps, and then, angry with himself for his precaution, he drew a clasp knife from his pocket, opened it, and cut the rope asunder.

“Why should I take these pains to secure my safety, as though my mind was not made up to staying here,” he said, “and I would have still left me one opportunity to escape? Let the sea carry it off for what I care.”

He found the door of his Roost open, and hanging by one hinge; he had not locked it behind him when he had borne Edmund Delancy down the steps on the night that the friend had come in search of him, and it had remained open ever since, swinging to and fro with every wind, and helping in its way to the slow, sure destruction of the crazy building of which it formed a part.

Aynard glanced once at his Roost before ascending the steps to the interior, but its appearance did not daunt him. It might have daunted a man of stronger

nerve, for the place was a ruin, and there was danger in it. It was falling. Slowly, but surely, it had given way beneath the incessant attacks of its eternal enemies, bending more and more with every storm away from the open sea—a something that seemed crouching for its life against the furious gale which shook it with an ague, and made every plank creak ominously. Nothing had been done to repair it in the summer weather, when the opportunity was favourable, and a child might have seen in that night its insecurity and danger. The days of Aynard's Roost were numbered ; people from land that day had observed a change in it since the last night's storm, a craning more forwards of the upper story, whence the green light had shone fitfully in old days, and was to shine once more before utter ruin came.

"Yes, it is home," Aynard repeated, as he went up the creaking steps into his room ; "there will come nothing to disturb me here."

He thought of Ned Delancy the instant afterwards, and how he had been sought out in the dark hours of his discomfiture ; and as he latched the inner door he hoped that the old sympathy would not bring the friend again. Delancy might hear that he was not at Aber with Anne Judge, and come in search of him once more ; and he should not be able to endure his shallow attempts to prove that there was comfort for him beyond the present hour. At last he knew better.

He brought distress to others as well as to himself with every step in life. So let life and Aynard's Roost end with him together !

He found his oil-can in the place where he had left it last, and replenished his lamp ; the matches were on the mantelpiece in the old place, and he lighted his lamp with difficulty, stumbling over rugged pieces of flooring in the dark, and unable to account for the inequalities beneath his feet, until the light showed him that the planks were separating from each other, and that, as the tide rose, there were glimpses of the dark water surging beneath him. The lamp flickered as wildly as though it were in the night air without, and through the rent seams of his walls the wind came whistling sharply.

Aynard walked towards his box—and it was like walking up a hill in that direction—unlocked it, and took therefrom a heavy pilot-coat, which he put on to screen him from the intense cold that had met him there. For a man reckless of his life, this seemed an inconsistency ; but it was the old winter custom, and he fell into it almost by habit. It was not the custom of the Roost to rock gently to and fro, and creak dismal with every movement ; to have strange shudderings like a something capable of fear, and that felt danger close at hand ; but Aynard remarked not the alteration, or took no heed of it. He sat down and opened a book at last, and tried to read ; but it was an

old romance of chivalry, and there was man's devotion to woman in it, and woman's unalterable devotion to man against all difficulties and in the face of all opposition, and he hurled the book to the end of the room, and cursed it for mocking him in that hour.

He would go mad there in time if the Roost lasted, it was evident; by himself, and when he believed himself at his best, he had been always at his worst, and had taken distorted views of the life from which he had concealed himself. He thought next that he would write, and he looked about the table for writing materials, finding at last that the ink-bottle was dry and the pens were missing.

He was sorry for this; he should have liked then, he thought, to have written a few lines to Delancy, to Clara, and Anne Judge, stating that he bore no malice in his heart towards them; that they were all his friends, from whom he had isolated himself lest further troubles should come to them and him by his rash intermeddling. The letter might have been discovered at the Roost on the first day that those people who were anxious concerning him rowed there and found him dead; he believed that he should die calmly there, and that the wretched tenement in which he stood would long outlast him. He should die soon; the Roost, which shivered and moaned about him, had stood as fierce a storm before, and was stronger than it looked, for all the neglect which it had had to encounter

during his long absence. He was inclined to feel that his steward was unfaithful to his service after that, and he wished that he had not left five hundred pounds to him in that last will he wrote at Aber. The steward should have known his master's eccentricities better, and how, in trouble, he had always loved the place. Did the fool think that an Aynard would be ever free from trouble long?

A grinding noise beneath led him to open the window and look out. The tide was still rising, and the waves were dashing as freely against his boathouse as they dashed against the Ilpham cliffs that faced the sea. It was a great tide—a tide to be long remembered for its havoc round the coast. And Aynard looked beneath and felt that he was safe for that night.

“No one will dare to venture here,” he said, “not even that thoughtless, adventurous, unselfish friend who has been here before.”

He paused a moment, and then a second thought dismayed him for an instant.

“If he should set forth in a small boat like my own, he will be lost. But, thank Heaven, he is in London, and thinks me still at Aber with Anne Judge.”

The grinding noise beneath him was repeated, and then there rushed by him, and was carried away by the swift current, the boat which he had used to reach the Roost that night, and which had clung to its shelter and grated against its sides until the last wave had

borne it off for ever. He laughed wildly as it was swept away; then he closed the window again, and found that the light had been extinguished by the extra current of air that had been admitted there.

He was a long while searching for the lamp, which had been blown over by the wind, and he discovered that the glass was shivered and a great deal of the oil spilt. It flickered worse than ever when the wick was lighted, and sputtered as with resistance to all brightness, and as though affected with its master's mood. It filled the room with fitful shadows, which seemed to have some semblance of humanity, and to be figures waiting for the end. The house rocked more and more with every blast, and the noise of the tempest without was terrible to listen to.

He fancied once that he heard the woodwork supports splitting beneath him as he sat there, but he regarded this as fancy. He was assured now that the place would last his time, and would not desert him like his hopes. True to the last this Aynard's Roost; it was not like a woman.

The wind rose higher with the sea, and the Roost rocked more and more, but his faith was great still. And if it failed him, it concerned only himself, to whom life was wearisome enough. They were strange shadows which the lamplight made about the room, and he rose once and went to the recess wherein was his box, to make sure that no one was sitting there watching him.

His mind was sorely troubled, and even in his “home” he was not happy, for he folded his arms upon the table and buried his head in them, to think more intently of all that he had lost, of all the sorrowful errors of his life, leading away from happiness and for ever up to this.

Suddenly the door opened and was closed again. He looked up, and there was another shadow, unsteady with the flare of the lamp like all the rest of them, and standing by the door, in dark trailing garments, waiting for him.

This was the figure of death, he thought at last, and surely there was a face to it—a sorrowful white face which was to haunt him whilst he stayed there. Had his mind really given way? he asked himself, or was the figure coming towards him with arms outstretched, and like unto one whom he had known and loved, a something tangible?

It came closer to him, and laid two hands upon his arm.

“Hugh,” was the word feebly whispered forth.

“Clara,” he answered; “from life or from the grave, which is it?”

CHAPTER XVII.

THE LAST OF AYNARD'S ROOST.

“FROM life or the grave, which is it?” Aynard exclaimed.

“From life,” was the answer, given in a feeble voice, “and to take you back to life, if you will let me.”

“Ah, that is a task beyond your power even.”

“I have come to ask forgiveness for all the past, Hugh.”

“It is forgiven freely.”

“And,” she continued, “to tell you all the truth.”

“I know the truth too well.”

“No—you do not.”

He looked at her attentively, scarcely believing that she was alive, or that his first love could be with him in that wretched room, on so desperate a night. She spoke so differently to him, she looked into his face so earnestly and pityingly—and yet claiming pity for herself—that he could only believe it to be a dream still, and the figure there the Clara of his visions—

never, never of his waking life. How was it possible that she could have come in search of him on a night full of peril to strong, stout hearts, and from which such hearts might even shrink—she, a woman who had been weak and timid at her best? Yes, it was all a dream—a pleasant dream, that he prayed might last—which was sent him for his comfort, and which he would not curse at for its mockery when the waking came to him. For even in his dreams he had seen her once again.

But when she stood by his side and touched his hands with hers—when in her eyes he saw the glistening tears, and knew that she was trembling very much, and that her dress was wet with sea-foam—the truth came nearer to him.

“Is it really Clara Burlinson?” he asked.

“Yes, it is I.”

“Do you hear the tempest without? How is it possible for you to have reached me? How is it possible that you can return?”

“I came against all their wishes, when I knew all the truth—against the wishes of all but one, perhaps, and he has shared the danger with me.”

“Edmund Delancy?” asked Aynard.

“Yes. He is below.”

“Now that the storm is at its height like this, what boat could have brought you through the surf?” he said, still doubtfully.

“The lifeboat and its crew. They have been enlisted in our service, and are waiting for you. There is death, Hugh, in this dreadful place.”

“There may be,” he said, as a more furious onslaught of the wind and sea made every timber crack again; “and you, at least, must not share it with me. Pray depart at once: there is no power to alter my resolve, it is beyond all human solicitation. Go—with my blessing on you, Clara—to the better life which will meet you in time, and where I shall not shadow it. Go, believing that I am happier already at the thought that you have ventured here to see me at the last.”

“Not without you, Hugh.”

“Ah, he has told you to say that,” said Aynard, sorrowfully. “This is his last kind-hearted scheme, feeling that your power would be greater over me than his own, and knowing how unavailing any argument of his would be. You should not think of me at the last. I did not think of you much, for I have left all my money to Anne Judge.”

“That does not affect me, Hugh. I like Anne Judge.”

“Providing that Delancy marries her, for he loves her very much, and should be happy with her. He will know that that was my last wish, and respect it. You can tell him that yourself, now.”

“I will tell him what you say,” she answered.

"You must learn to forget him, and not to look upon Anne Judge as a successful rival. He must be ever your friend."

"I am resigned to losing him."

"That is well."

"But not to losing you, Hugh," she answered, "for I have read my own heart aright at last, and it is full of love—for you!"

"Clara, Clara, would you kill me?" he exclaimed. "Is this part of a cruel scheme with which to delude me for awhile?—the trick to lure the madman from his cell?"

"It is the truth, Hugh," answered Clara, letting her hands fall upon his shoulder. "Forgive the boldness which confesses it to you, but your life is in peril, and only I can save you from it. I have been a wayward, jealous woman—I may be very weak and jealous to the last—but I loved you, Hugh, when I thought that I did not; and if you had listened patiently to me on the day of our separation, or if my pride would have let me speak and so have beaten down your own, I could have asked you not to fear my affection any more."

"It is a dream—it must be still a dream," he murmured.

"I have learned to love you, and to forget Delancy," she said, "and that love has made me strong, and brought me here to tell it you, as I could not tell a

firmer and a sterner man. But you are very weak, Hugh, weaker than I, and I can help you, watch over you, devote to you my life. Will you cast me back upon myself?"

"To be loved, and—by you," he murmured, "you from whom I have hidden so long, lest your beauty should render me miserable again—you, whom I could not face!"

"But could forget, Hugh," she answered, sadly—perhaps after all, and in that strange meeting, with a faint jealousy predominant, unless, with a woman's tact, it was to draw him from his own morbid reasonings, "for you would have married Anne Judge."

"Yes, because she was one whom you had loved, and whom I felt that I could love in time, for your sake," said Aynard, "because I was utterly alone. Oh, Clara, is this all truth, or part of the plot which you have undertaken to sustain?"

"It is truth; I plot only for your happiness and mine."

"Why have I not guessed this—known this before? There is no concealing a true affection; at one time or another the mask drops."

"It has dropped now, Hugh," she answered; "you are in danger, and I conceal nothing. Before this, remember how we parted, and how poor I had become. Hugh, do you distrust me still?"

"No," he answered, as he folded her in his arms

and kissed her passionately. "I believe you, Clara, and am happy. If we could only die this night together and end the story before the doubts arise again."

"Not to die, Hugh," she said; "but to pass together from here to the life that lies beyond for both of us, which we will share together, a weak man and woman, perhaps, but strong in ourselves and our affection. Come, Hugh, with me, and let the shadows which have darkened our lives remain in this awful place where they began, and to which you will return no more."

"Heaven bless you, Clara, for those words. It is like the light coming to me after all these years. It is—"

He paused as she clung to him suddenly. The gale had grown more furious, the Roost rocked still more violently, and the timbers were heard cracking in many places.

"Hugh, let us go."

"It may be to die together after all," Aynard said, mournfully. "Fate has followed me too long and too persistently to let us pass away to the life of which you speak."

"I would rather die with you than leave you here alone," said Clara. "But life is opening out for us, not ending, Hugh; let us go."

At the same moment Delancy burst into the room.

"The supports are giving way, Aynard, and there is not a moment to spare. For your lives, you two, come down with us."

Even yet the weak mind of the man, or the strong will which had led him to that desolate spot, seemed to resist the old love and the new thoughts which its return had brought him.

"Can I ever make her happy, Ned?" he said. "If after all this is only pity for me, and I step from here to a hundred fresh mistakes? And if it is love, Clara, why, love for such a man is very dangerous."

"Not if that man loves me. I see what he will be—gentle, affectionate, and true, and I die with him if he remain now. You will come for my sake, or it is your love for me that I will doubt next."

"I will come," he answered.

Delancy led the way down the steps, and the great boat rowed towards them. The sea was dashing over the boat and rowers, and there was a tempest in the air at which stouter hearts than Lady Burlinson's might have well quailed that night. She shrank back with fear for an instant, now that the past excitement was over and the mission accomplished.

"Hugh, we may never reach land alive," she whispered; "I am faint and ill."

"She is going to die," cried Aynard, wildly; "and this is the end after all."

"No, the beginning of better times, Hugh," cried

Delancy. "But for Heaven's sake make haste. Here, shall I carry her into the boat or will you?"

"Don't touch her, please," said Aynard, anxiously. "I will bring her down myself."

He caught her in his strong arms, and carried her down the steps into the boat, into which he sprang with her, all anxiety for her to speak or look at him again. Delancy put a brandy-flask to her lips, and she opened her eyes again, and murmured :

"Where is Hugh?"

"Here, at your side, dear. Here, never to part from you again."

"Cover her with the cloaks, then, and hold fast," cried Delancy, "for we are leaving Aynard's Roost for ever. We are——"

A sudden pause, a wild cry from the Ilpham men, and then Delancy shouting out to them to pull away—away for their lives' sakes. For Aynard's Roost was moving, sinking, as they looked towards it, and as they rowed on with all their force it seemed to follow them—to plunge towards them, and with a mighty crash to collapse, and be swallowed up by the angry waves into which it disappeared.

"Just in time, Hugh."

"Thank Heaven!" ejaculated Aynard, as he pressed Clara closer to him with his arm, "for her sake."

"For both sakes, not to mention my own, which is of no consequence," replied Delancy; "and there's an

end to the Roost, and to all Hugh Aynard's trouble at the same time. If you are still fond of omens, Hugh," he added, "take this for one of the best of them."

Aynard pressed his hand, but made no reply; indeed, there was a difficulty in speaking, or in being heard amidst the fury of the storm which raged about them. There was danger yet before the Ilpham shore was reached, for the waves swept over them and the boat tossed wildly. Aynard was nervous and anxious; and it was not till Clara murmured that she was conscious now, that he had hope that all would be fair and well with him at last.

"All right, Hugh," cried Delancy; "here's my aunt's cottage straight ahead, by George!"

"Your aunt?" exclaimed Aynard. "What aunt?"

"Oh, the dearest, crossest, stubbornest old girl in the world," he cried exultantly. "I'll introduce you to her presently."

"Ned, you are going to be happy too, I hope."

"Well, between ourselves I am going to try."

"I was afraid——"

"Yes, so was I," he answered with his old quickness; "but I think I see the end. Don't talk any more, but look to Clara. We are safe, old fellow."

The boat touched the land, where there were people waiting for it, anxious and nervous as to the ultimate result.

"How has it all come about?" asked Aynard.

"How did you know where I had gone, or what had happened?"

"Oh, it is a long story, which I am not going to tell in a high wind," said Delancy. "Let us get Clara to good Mrs. Simmonds' house at once. Why, here is dear mamma to see to her."

Mrs. Delancy was amongst the loiterers there, as might have been expected, and she ran to see to her boy rather than to Clara Burlinson.

"My dear Ned, I have been so anxious. Oh, how wet you are!"

"Yes, a trifle damp; see to Clara, please, and take her home."

When they were all at Prospect Terrace, and Mrs. Delancy had exerted her authority to get Clara to bed, and had put her to bed herself like a baby; when Aynard was walking up and down the front room, picturing to himself the future, and dazzled at it yet; when Mrs. Delancy was making stiff glasses of grog all round, and Mrs. Simmonds, who had been surprised by lodgers only a few hours before, had resolved to sit up for the rest of the night, in case anything more should be wanted by the eccentric personages who had intruded on her presence, Edmund Delancy, once again equipped for a journey, suddenly re-entered the room.

"My dear boy!" exclaimed the mother, "why, what is the matter now?"

"My dear mother," answered Delancy, "I never

could rest in Ilpham. I never found it possible to settle down in it, and so I'm going for a little walk."

"A little walk?" echoed Mrs. Delancy.

"I have put on a dry suit—my Sunday best, in fact—and my waterproof and knickerbockers over that; and now for Thirby Cross."

"Oh, how rash you are!" exclaimed his mother.
"Why, I have sent a messenger——"

"No, you haven't, for I stopped him at the street-door and told him not to go," said Delancy. "I take the news myself, for I have no doubt that the break up of the Roost will have reached the good souls there in some odd way or other, and made them very anxious. I shall walk to the old place."

"But the dreadful weather?"

"Mrs. Simmonds says that it has left off raining, and she can see a star or two. Mrs. Simmonds thought that it would leave off raining when the tide turned. Mrs. Simmonds is an estimable woman."

"There is scarcely a reason for your journey, Ned," said Aynard. "They are early folk to retire, and will know nothing of what has happened in the Backwater until daylight shows them that the Roost has gone."

"I am not so sure of that. And in case I am right, and you are wrong, I shall go."

"But the story, Ned, of all that brought you here."

"My mother will tell you. I am going to tell it

first to a little spinster of my acquaintance. Good-evening."

And before further questioning could be put to him, Ned Delancy had started on his errand. His friends had thought that he had better wait till the morning; and the more they wished to impress that idea upon him, the more resolved he was to start at once. But the reader is aware by this time that Edmund Delancy was an obstinate man.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE BEARER OF GOOD NEWS.

EDMUND DELANCY walked all the way to Thirby Cross. The rain had ceased and the wind seemed to have dropped a little since wreaking its malice on the old Roost, that had so long resisted it.

A damp, dull, and dark walk to Thirby Cross, but one which Delancy enjoyed, for it set his limbs in action, warmed his blood, and raised his spirits. He was going to see Anne Judge, who was no longer engaged to be married to another, whom he was anxious to forgive, and who he wished should forgive him ; he was going, he hoped, to begin life again with some of the light upon it which he had lately missed. He went on singing to himself by the way like a light-hearted fellow as he was, and met but one person in his progress, and that was a man with his arm in a sling, who shrank from him to the other side of the way as though he took him for a thief and was afraid of him.

When he had become acquainted with all the incidents

of that eventful night, Delancy thought it was possible that he had met and passed George Day on his road —the one marching to that happiness which should reward all honest persevering men, and the other stealing towards that darkness into which such knaves as he deserve to disappear.

Delancy found Thirby Cross full of the excitement that he had anticipated. What a clever, far-seeing fellow he was to guess that this would be the case ! There were people astir in the village—servants of the great house and others—talking and gesticulating. Aynard's Roost was known to have disappeared that night by all whom he encountered, and whose uneasy doubts he set at rest with the good news which he had walked from Ilpham to communicate. There were men who had learned to esteem the eccentric master in the village, for they gave a cheer at the intelligence and blessed Delancy for his news.

When he was in Mr. Aynard's hall, he proclaimed the news again to the maid-servants huddling together there, and when Aunt Judge advanced with her grave and measured steps to welcome the bearer of glad tidings, he startled the primness and propriety of that lady by flinging his arms round her and bestowing upon her a hearty kiss.

“Gracious me, man,” cried Mary Judge, pushing him away, “don't you know better manners than that?”

“Don’t be alarmed, aunt ; every man has a right to kiss his relations,” he exclaimed, “and I feel so happy a fellow to-night. Everybody is beginning to understand everybody else, and it’s just like the last chapter in a novel, where all things are satisfactorily wound up. Where’s Anne ?”

“She is in the drawing-room, waiting for bad news, poor girl,” said Mary Judge, “and not thinking of anything that is fortunate or good upon its way toward her.”

“Do you think that there is ?”

“You have brought good news here, Mr. Delancy, already.”

“Do you think,” he added in a lower tone, “that she will forgive me all my bad tempers and bounce on the night I went to Aber ?”

“I cannot tell. I should fancy,” said Aunt Judge, scornfully, “that she has had something more serious to think about than you.”

“I hope she has. I’ll go and ask her.”

“Wait one moment,” said Aunt Judge, catching him somewhat unceremoniously by the sleeve of his coat and arresting his hasty movement towards the room ; “don’t be too abrupt with her—too quick—she’s not strong, and is only a child, remember.”

“Ah, I see that she has told you all the wicked things I said that night ; thank you for siding with her against me. And now, do you mind letting go my sleeve ?”

"Yes, I do. I'm not going to have her scared and distressed at this time of night, and I am going in with you."

"Very well. Will you oblige me by taking my arm? Thank you."

They went into the drawing-room together, and Anne Judge, sitting by the table very still and thoughtful, looked up as they came in, and then uttered a cry of great surprise.

"Mr. Delancy has come to tell us that Mr. Aynard is safe," said Aunt Judge, "and that the master left the Roost with his friends before the downfall of the place."

"I am very glad," cried Anne, drawing a deep breath of relief, but looking timidly away from him who had been so stern and hard with her in their last meeting.

"It was good news that would not keep till morning, Anne," he said, as he advanced and held both hands towards her, "and so I have come from Ilpham with it. I have brought, too, the old Ned Delancy back, the fellow that has no connection with that other jealous, cross-grained, bumptious youth whom you met in Wales a day or two ago. Will you receive him in all frankness and all kindness, Anne, or tell him to go away?"

"Oh, Ned," Anne Judge could only answer, trembling very much and looking shily at him now.

"I hardly expect to be forgiven at once, Anne—it

will take time ; but by degrees the free pardon will come, I hope."

He held her hands in his, and she made no effort to withdraw them.

" And you have forgiven me so soon then, knowing—"

" Knowing exactly the truth, my dear, and loving you, I think, now, and, if it is possible, more than ever."

She was crying in his arms the instant afterwards, and he was stooping down to kiss the tears away, when Mary Judge garotted him.

" There, that will do for the present," said Aunt Judge, separating these lovers as if she had been a policeman. " I told you not to distress the girl, and not to begin all at once like this. You can kiss me again if you want to be affectionate."

Delancy looked in her face, and noted a quiet smile on it which was new and strange to him, and replaced that sourness which had aged and hardened it before its time, and said :

" And so I will, aunt, and glad of the opportunity."

" Yes, I dare say that you are. And now let us talk rationally for a little while," she said, sitting down. " How did you come here ? what makes a man so firm as you are, and so obstinate as you have proved yourself to be, in so amiable a mood ?"

" Anne, I have seen your mother," said Delancy ; " she

came to me in London a few hours after you had left her, and told me all, with many tears and self-reproaches. She had parted for good with a certain George Day ; he was not in a position to marry and to keep a wife just then, and he thought that they had better go their separate ways, especially as you had upset all calculations by refusing to continue your engagement with Hugh Aynard. She told me all the truth of the long conspiracy against our happiness, begged me to see you and to intercede with you for her—begged me to come and ask you to be my wife at once, as a guarantee of her good faith towards me, her deep love and self-sacrifice as regards Anne Judge."

The eldest woman thought of the Aynard will, which Mrs. Judge was cognizant of, but made no remark. Mrs. Judge was a mother who had a right to study her daughter's interests, and she had done so at the expense of her own humiliation. Let us, in charity towards our poor humanity, look at the last action of the mother in this light.

"Poor mother!" said Anne, "I will go to her, I——"

"Oh, no, you won't," answered Delaney. "The best of women, and the best of mothers in her way ; but, in her own opinion now, as well as mine, Anne, best apart from you. She thinks so, and has gone away of her own free will to be seen or heard of no more until the daughter's spinsterhood is over. When we are married, Anne, she will write and tell us where

she is, and she hopes that now and then we will go and see her, and do our best to make her heart rejoice in our felicity. Anne, your mother has a few faults, perhaps, and has plotted a little too much for your advancement; but for this last effort in our cause we forgive the part she took against us."

"And you came here at once?" said Aunt Judge.
"Did Mrs. Judge speak of Mr. Aynard to you?"

"When she told me of Anne's flat disobedience to my wishes, her charming obstinacy—how I admire an obstinate and pretty girl!—her disregard of Aynard's feelings, and her annulment of the engagement—if such a string of possibilities and impossibilities was ever an engagement after all, Anne—when I heard of Aynard's disappointment and departure from Aber, I guessed where I should find him: I came on, and found that he was at the Roost. I brought Clara with me—Clara who, after all, loves him, and was heart-broken at his danger—and by an amiable plot of ours, which was to keep no more secrets back, and speak out all the truth, we brought him from the Roost for ever. You will hear that story from Clara by-and-by; I think that we have talked quite enough concerning other people."

He edged his chair towards Anne's, and Mary Judge affected not to see him. Presently she rose, and muttering something about the servants, went out of the room and left them together, like a wise, dear soul who knew

something of life, and had understood in her day, alas, something of love !

“Thank you, aunt,” said Delancy, after she had gone. “And now, Anne, is it an engagement, a real engagement between you and me? A short engagement, for we are to be married on the same day that old, sensitive Hugh marries Clara Burlinson; but a very strict one, that even an advertisement in a newspaper shall not change.”

“Ah, Ned, you have not forgiven me, or you would not talk like that!”

“Why, we have not quite made it up, you see, yet.”

Then they kissed and made it up for good, and Delancy was very glad that he had come to Thirby Cross.

“Do you not think it a little strange, Ned,” Anne Judge asked, “to find me sitting in this room?”

“No. Why should I think so?” he rejoined.

“I sat here once waiting for bad news, when the house was alive with excitement and suspense, and they brought you in at last, and through that window, just as I feared that they would. I was waiting here again for Mr. Aynard, or for the worst of news concerning him, and thinking what an unfortunate place this Thirby Cross was to all within it, when you came to make my heart light.”

“And to assure you that all the ill-luck—the stern lesson of fate, as Hugh would call it—has vanished

away for ever, with that old den in the Backwater. We have had our share of troubles, and got them over early in life, my dear ; now for ever afterwards the sunshine."

" You must not speak so sanguinely as that," Anne said, gently reproving him ; " we will be hopeful ever, and if the troubles come, Ned, why, I think that you and I together can bear them whilst they last."

" And till we see them on their way towards us, Anne Judge, we will be grateful for the brighter light about us."

" Grateful ever, Ned."

" Right—yes, for ever grateful for this day which ends all mistakes so pleasantly, and leads to the purer atmosphere where no doubts can live. Well, aunt," said Delancy, as Mary Judge came into the room again, " it is all settled, we are going to be married next week."

" Oh, Ned, I never said that—I never thought of that," cried Anne.

" Or the week afterwards, for Hugh Aynard will not be the man I wish to see him, and am sure to see him, until he has married Clara Burlinson ; therefore I am naturally in a hurry to have this matter arranged, and as he insists upon our wedding-day bearing the same date as his own, I cannot very well disappoint my friend."

" Do you know what time it is now?" asked Mary Judge.

“Upon my word I have not the slightest idea,” answered Delancy.

“It is past seven o’clock, and we are wasting oil and candles still,” said Aunt Judge, opening the shutters. “There, I thought as much. Here’s the daylight close upon us, and it will be a beautiful day, too.”

“Of course it will,” cried Delancy, “for this is the beginning of our new lives. Of our lives together, Anne!”

They walked to the window and looked out. The day was brightening, the old Roost with its danger signals was not there; the landscape was fair beyond them, the storm clouds had all been swept away, and the sun was rising bright and golden over the distant water to make good Delancy’s prophecy.

Thus we leave them standing in the sunlight together; hearts that are young and true, and had only misunderstood each other for a little while; hearts that are full of forgiveness as well as love, or there had been something less pure in the affection which began when one was “only a child of seventeen!”

They are looking across the landscape very thoughtfully, taking the brighter day as the reflex of their brighter life and happy in their silence there. They look beyond, as at the future, where the sky is blue and the water golden with the flush of sunrise, and Aunt Judge watches them and blesses them. She sees

the future for herself also, and is grateful—a solitary woman ever, for it is her lot and she repines not, but one who will steal very often from her solitude, her home not far away from theirs, and who will be happy in their happiness and shed a few quiet tears of joy sometimes over their little children. She will not be housekeeper at Thirby Cross then, and she will think it her duty, for Anne's sake, to look in upon the mother at times and see that all is as well with that strange nature as it can ever be.

Thus we leave them, and thus our little painting fades upon the wall. A word or two escapes the lovers there, and we listen before they pass away from us.

“Yes, I will think that that is our future beyond this, dear, and all the darkness and the tempest matters of the past. For in the distance, and not very far distant either,” he says, clasping her to his heart, “I see the wife advancing.”

Anne struggles from him after awhile, takes her aunt's arm for protection, and looks up laughingly into his face.

“Yes, but not the wife at present, Ned—only Anne Judge, Spinster.”

THE END.









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